Search for Personal Fulfilment:

The Bigger Light
THE BIGGER LIGHT is the third book in the trilogy, Clarke's naturalistic saga about the Black West Indian of Toronto. Like the first two books, this one tells the story of the West Indians who search for success and a feeling of belongingness in the cold, business-like world of Toronto. This volume deals with two Barbadians - Boysie Cumberbatch and his wife Dots - who have actually begun to "make it" in their new home. Boysie and Dots are prospering now - he in the office cleaning business and she as a nurse's aide. Having become successful they now find themselves faced with an emptiness in their success. The theme of *The Bigger Light's* can be summed up as "the predicament of those who leave a stagnant homeland for a nation where they will never feel at ease." (1)

*The Bigger Light* is a sensitive study of the breakdown of a marriage, of sexual need, uncertainty and self-centredness. Cultural alienation is integrally bound up with the theme of personal and sexual alienation. (2)

At forty-nine, Boysie has a thriving office-cleaning business, solid investments in real estate and a deepening identity crisis. Clarke, a novelist of exceptional gifts, traces Boysie's attempts to get a coherent view of a life that is broken up into compartments. One such is of his old West Indian associations
now abandoned. Another is his increasingly alienated relationship with his wife Dots, who spins in her own separate orbit. And a third is his new "image", that of a man of property, respected by his banker, yet somehow dissatisfied with himself.

Thematically, Boysie's mental drift away from and again towards mostly the former West Indians, his wife, Barbados, and Barbadian memories, his difficult early days in Canada, is the novel's core.(3)

The techno-structural device to suggest Boysie's faltering grip on his environment, his mental sclerosis and narrowing yet blurred vision, is the idee fixe, a tightening cycle of recurrent and essentially trifiling thoughts and events. They punctuate his day dreaming and inactive, routinized, vacuous life that is scarcely more substantive.(4)

The Bigger Light differs from the earlier novels of the Trilogy. The social environment we see here is less oppressive and intrusive. The lessons of Boysie's life and his fading marriage may well suggest the perils of attenuated ethnic links in an isolated community, but they are intelligible also well beyond the imperatives of ethnic and racial conflict.

As we can see the book's central figures Boysie and his Dots have lived for years in Canada - longing for memories that are faded and confused. Dots who began life in Toronto as a housemaid now works in a hospital as a nurse's aide involving, long hours with over time that is not paid for. Out of her earnings she deposits "One hundred and sixty five dollars and keeps back exactly thirty dollars for pocket money and streetcar fare", (T.B.L.p.6). And Boysie who was unemployed when they were married later becomes the owner of an office cleaning business. Like most of their fellow West Indians the two of them
have left behind a corrupt society that offered no outlet for their energies. At present they are upwardly mobile. Boysie, in particular is well on his way into the upper middle class. "He was an
\textbf{successful} and\textbf{transformed} immigrant (T.B.L.p.3). Now he dislikes to hold parties or go to the Mercury Club with Dots. "He likes to settle down in a dark corner with Dots, far from the press of people, and watch them and wonder why they, (the fellow immigrants) did not change their ways when they came to a new country", (T.B.L.p.15). Once he even tells Dots:

\begin{quote}
This country have enough jobs for every body to get atleast one. Look at a man like me. I come into this country, and I did truely and really suffer a little bit. But it takes a while to know the ropes. I know the ropes now: I have worked hard as hell for what I have. I build a business. (T.B.L.p.16)
\end{quote}

Boysie is a reformed man. He spends his leisure reading the three Toronto newspapers or replying to the editors on selected articles. In his letters he voices his opinion on matters such as pollution, urban development and high-rise appartments in the downtown area where he lives. He feels that it is a waste of time to pen letters to the editors on racial problem in the city, or on police brutality.

Boysie is acutely conscious of the fact that he is on his way into the middle class and constantly worries about what is proper for 'a man in his position'. (5)

He maintains that he had not experienced discrimination and prejudice and that the police had never stopped his panel truck to harrass him, when he comes home late at night from his janitorial services.

\textbf{The Bigger Light} focusses on the material success and spiritual disintegration of Boysie Cumberbatch and his wife Dots. (6) Even as they climb
the economic ladder they are slipping deeper and deeper into a sexually repressed middle age. Inspite of their material success both of them are unfulfilled and dissatisfied with life. In moving up they have also become estranged from the spicy, vulgar world of the West Indians in Toronto. Though they have money they no longer throw parties as they used to, Instead of going to the restaurants and dancing places they loved, where they danced to reggae music and ate meat pattie, the two of them now spend the week-end nights in sedate white bars. Boysie in particular feels estranged not merely from his wife. Having put behind him the joyous ways of new immigrant, he rants against the crimes committed by more recent arrivals and writes fatuous letters to the Toronto news papers. The novel finds him grappling with a problem that has haunted immigrant novels since Abraham Caban's *The Rise of David Livinsky-The Prince of Success*.

Boysie is bent upon establishing a new Canadian identity for himself and assiduously writes letters to Canadian newspapers and magazines, and thus expressess his will to identify himself with his new country. He cherishes the few letters that are published. One letter which even Dots favoured above all was that which he had written on the event of Henry's death. Henry was his only friend and it was a formal letter written to suit the occasion that had so tragically struck him.

But these letters are written in uncomfortable, flawed English, laughable in its cliche - ridden literary pretentiousness. The letters serve mainly to highlight Boysi's loneliness and cultural dilemma. (7)

Throughout the novel Boysie is "thinking". Since he has little education his thoughts do not really take him anywhere. He circles aimlessly around his own isolation. With Henry gone, 'it was like having been abandoned on an
unknown lonely road, like having the pleasant, cheerful side of his nature ripped away from him, (T.B.L.p.5).

When the book opens, his marriage with Dots is already frozen into mutual gazing out of the window. Dots is off to the hospital by the time Boysie returns and is back home only after he leaves for his janitorial work at four in the evening. They seldom meet each other except on Sundays only to say nothing to each other. Boysie’s only companion during his stay at home is the little cat which he supposes Dots has brought to be his companion in her absence and hers in his. Boysie’s marital relationship with Dots as he begins to see is that he hates her or he tells himself so. “He had never been very trusting not confiding in her, nor she in him; and they had lived for six years in their pragmatic cocoon of marriage, while at the same time going their own ways and thinking their own thoughts,” (T.B.L.p.10)

Another way of killing time for Boysie is to gaze out of the window, waiting for a woman dressed in a long brown winter-coat and wearing a white beret cap which was drooped at the back of her head. She emerges from the subway, crosses the street and disappears. Once he mentions about her to Dots who gives her opinion: “She’s probably a whore reaching back home, Boysie boy. Don’t worry yourself about her.”, (T.B.L.p.10). Boysie feels hurt and wonders how his wife could be so cruel to the creation of his observations. Dots plans to move to willowdale, a place in the city where most of the city’s black population reside. She is occupied with work planning her material success and always conscious that her living in that Ontario Street (where she resides at present) a low rental housing district was making it possible for her to hold her head as high as she likes. Due to this she drifts away from her husband. Boysie sees it thus: the only thing that lasted with him was his wife and now: " she was slipping away gradually from him by her own silence", (T.B.L.p.12.). Even in bed she was just lying beside him, "like a dying patient would lie on top of a bed in a hospital
ward." (T.B.L.p.13). Dots thinks of adopting a child that she cannot have. She sees an advertisement calling for people willing to be the caretakers of a crippled - "invalid" - child named Jane. The child suffered from "Osteogenesis imperfecta" - meaning brittle bones, (T.B.L.p.159). She tells Bernice that the very thought of adopting a child like Jane brings her comfort - that not even her husband Boysie could bring (T.B.L.p.161). She feels that her husband was drifting away and herself powerless to reach out to him. Her wanderings with an anonymous person - 'the orderly' - as she puts it is one of the reasons that restricts her from looking into her husband's face. Boysie himself has seen her go out with 'the orderly' during his wanderings. (8). Both Boysie and Dots sense a gulf developing between them. Boysie sees Dots as "almost completely wiped out of the creative part of his life, and he saw her only as an asumed extra", (T.B.L.p.37).

Boysie yearns for a child. His realization of not having given this a serious thought renders him almost numb. He accuses Dots of her infertility in his soliloquies. Every West Indian woman he knew had at least two children. He feels that he now had money enough for bringing up his children but his wife could have none. "This woman can't even breed", he said to himself, "and she doesn't even come! I must be cursed now, for my past, or something. Christ! All she is interested in is her bank account and a down payment for a house in the suburbs. He wondered how he could live in a childless house, with a wrinkled sterile woman", (T.B.L.p.11).

To overcome this disappointment he seeks solace and comfort in the friendship of Mrs. James - a woman abandoned by her husband - who lives in the apartment below his. In order to get out of the cramped boredom which he has been experiencing in his own house, he takes Mrs. James' son to the restaurants, purchases all things for the boy and derives satisfaction. But the responsibility of being a "father-figure" to this boy which was the moral obligation Boysie assumed, and of being an "uncle", to the entire impoverished family, was more
than Boysie could tolerate, (T.B.L. p.171). So he retreats. Boysie drifts away from his friends and gradually from all things West Indian. His alienation, verging on the pathological, touches all corners of his life. (9).

Throughout the novel Boysie is found "thinking". But his thoughts do not really take him anywhere. He circles aimlessly in his own isolation. He was successful but with his wife, he proved to be a failure. Both Boysie and Dots experience a kind of vacuum settled between them, each ceasing to become a source of comfort for the other. This happened inspite of the material success the achieve in their lives. Even when he receives his Canadian passport that goes along with his Canadian citizenship he does not feel happy. He feels that he lacked freedom all these years. Though unhappy in Canada, he cannot return to Barbados. Moneymaking does not satisfy him. His visit to the black community centre along with Mrs. James repels him by its shabbiness and air of militancy. He can never become assimilated in his new home nor is he comfortable with other West Indians. In one sense he is a classic case of newly rich anomie. (10). Yet his plight is also that of the Canadians themselves. The Toronto we see in The Bigger Light is a barren, chilly place. From Boysie's appartment window, we watch its abandoned old people as they walk cautiously through the snow to buy liquor returning with their brown paper bags. Boysie senses a hopeless sterility behind Canada's smug, cozy exterior. Yet he cannot go home for 'home' is a place of venal politicians and profiteering U.S. business men.

Intensely isolated, and his spirit no longer nourished by the approval of his bank manager and employers, Boysie he puts all his property - a new car, four houses and all his savings - which he had not disclosed to his wife Dots - on her name as a will and one day, while supposedly shopping for food for a party, he heads his car towards the American border:

Boysie's impulsive crossing of the American border in his powerful car, instead of dying in the suicidal car crash he
appears to be courting, simply does not seem to dissolve very much.(11).

Boysie’s estrangement and later his escape from his wife, Dots must not be viewed as deliberate actions. Indeed none of the material failures in the three novels, *The Meeting Point, Storm of Fortune, The Bigger Light*, comprising the trilogy, cannot be described as wilful, deliberate acts. They have been caused by a compendium of paradoxes which result from a negation of certain basic gender roles such as those of father, husband, wife and mother. Total surrender to the pleasures of the body proves not be a good enough substitute for a stable family. Boysie and Mr. Burrmann discover this. Of all the relationships with or without children, that between Estelle and Mr. Burrmann emerges as an exemplary one. She has fulfilled his desire by bearing him a son, something which Boysie’s wife did not or could not do. Mbelolo not only brings joy to his mother Estelle, but is also his father Mr. Burrmann’s pride.

Mr. Burrmann assumes the role of a parent which he does for the first time in these novels. One sees him in a supportive role to his son. He shows involvement in his son’s social development and his educational upbringing. He sends his son to a Toronto French High School and has his name on the list for Upper Canada College. The affair between Estelle and Mr. Burrmann - unlike the marital bond between Dots and Boysie - emerges from an unacceptable social association and typifies the proper roles of parents in the sociological unit of the family.

*The Bigger Light* perhaps the finest of all Clarke’s novels, is relentless and devastating, a bleak analysis of the West Indian’s new life in Canada.(12).

*The Bigger Light* is a painful book to read. In reading it, we are forced to look hard both at the inhuman machinery that surrounds and destroys them.
In their search for "being", an identity, the immigrants from the Third World countries succeed in achieving material success. In their efforts to identity themselves with the new culture by alienating themselves from their native culture. But even then, as is the case with Boysie and Dots it becomes impossible to forget the pain they experience as immigrants. The pain stays and in a way destroys the being that is within them. Though the novel's title has nothing to do with Boysie's fate it has much to speak of Estelle and Burrmann's relationship.
REFERENCES


4. ibid, pp. 27.


9. Leslie Sanders, pp. 97


12. Leslie Sanders, pp. 98