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An overview of Wilson Harris's *Guyana Quartet*

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Abstract

Wilson Harris is an extremely productive and a well-known Guyanese novelist, poet and critic. He is generally appreciated as a writer who desires to create new form in his narratives by bringing reconciliation among races and seek for the basic unity of man. Harris's writings created a community where one can get a "vision of oneness". Unlike other Caribbean writers who presented the state of fragmentations of the past in their narratives, Harris emerged as a writer who faced the bitter past and bring reconciliations among races. This amalgamation which is untied from all cultural or racial issues, manifest a new state of consciousness. The Guyana Quartet is consisted of four pieces of novels namely – *Palace of the Peacock*, *The Far Journey of Oudin*, *The Whole Armour* and *The Secret Ladder*. These novels are multi-layered and densely metaphorical. The paper seeks to give an overview of the Guyana Quartet from different aspects and the attempt of Harris to create a new form of community through imagination.

Keywords- Quartet, Guyana, Caribbean, Races, Culture

Introduction

The Guyanese novelist, poet and critic, Wilson Harris was born on 24 March 1921 in New Amsterdam, British Guiana, of mixed Amerindian, European, and African descent. From 1939 to 1942, Harris engaged in studying land surveying and from 1955 to 1958, he became a senior surveyor of projects for the government of British Guiana. Harris's personal experiences employed as a land surveyor of the interior of Guyana has a strong effect on his novels –

The surveyors were an interesting breed...complete isolation without the kind of intellectual exchange that would go on in the normal course of things. Wilson lived with this for about seventeen years. It explained some of the writings in *Palace of the Peacock*. That is the writing of someone accustomed to talking to himself in the Guyana bush for seventeen years. (Birbalsingh, 44)

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Harris's novels are extremely difficult due to its extreme variety in both form and subject matter. As HenaMaes-Jelinek puts-

Harris novels can be viewed as one narrative canvas, at once spiritual biography and unrelenting quest for a new art of fiction inspired by a long-eclipsed native tradition. They are all "novels of expedition" exploring the multi-levelled inner space of the human consciousness, upsetting given categories of being and modifying the characters' (and the participating reader's) mode of perception. (Jelinek, xv)

Harris's first novel of the Guyana Quartet, published in 1960 is densely metaphorical. The novel explores the duality of men's nature and the imagination to transform as well as renewal of a man. The novel is the core of the author's imagination, the ability to reconstruct. To summarize the novel in Michael Gilkes words-

The plot centres round a journey made in an open boat by Donne (a white creole rancher with a reputation for cruelty and hard efficiency) and his racially mixed crew in search of the Amerindian settlement or Mission deep in the forest to which Donne's entire Amerindian work-force has fled because of ill-treatment. The crew, after an arduous journey, often carrying the boat overland through 'portages' in the forest, finally arrive at the Mission only to find that the Amerindians have again fled. They prepare to set off once more in search of the elusive Folk, taking along as a guide an old Amerindian woman who has been left behind by her people. They encounter rapids where a series of misfortunes begin. Carroll, the youngest crewman falls overboard and drowns; Schomburgh, the oldest, dies in his sleep; yet another man is lost overboard, and another is killed in a fight. The others all meet their deaths trying to climb the rock-face of a waterfall into the basin of which their boat eventually drifts and is abandoned. (Gilkes, 23)

The journey undertaken by the crew on a nameless river in the Guyanese jungle is a spiritual quest in which the author reinterprets a universal myth, a journey which depicts the preceding voyage took by a group of crewmen who drowned and face death. The preceding crew attempt to reach the heart of the inner kingdom and achieve high state of consciousness. Similarly, Donne and his men, in their search of the Amerindian, meet their deaths. At the end of the novel, the characters are rediscovered in the Palace of the Peacock, a vision of universal community formed from a structure of individual and interdependent identities. In the Palace, the narrator also appears and therefore represents a composition of memory. The sudden demise of the crew is predated by an original material death indicating that the novel is a re-enactment of the preceding drowned crew in light of the self-knowledge gained at the palace. The sun metaphor that was shattered into a constellation, at the end of the novel, indicated the collaboration of the Amerindian Folk with the multiracial crew.

The second novel of the Guyana Quartet, *The Far Journey of Oudin*, is set among the community of East Indian Peasant and introduces us to the atmosphere of the novel. The place is located in the area of Berbice, British Guiana, a place dominated by the thirst for material goods which leads the back breaking toil on the land and a miserable life. With no

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exception, the domination which happens in the novel leads the characters to question their own being. It drives most of the character to the ultimate tragedy and death that leads to the process of rebirth which in turns become a myth. Michael Gilkes comments on the novel-

The novel begins with the death of Oudin, then re-creates events leading up to this in a 'flash back': past, present and future co-exist with the narrative. Characters exist on several levels, as in Palace of the Peacock where the living are linked with the death (Gilkes, 48).

The novel opens with Oudin experiencing consciousness after death, then, shifts to the relationship with Beti, his wife, and Ram, the moneylender comes to terms with Oudin till his death. These events are then followed by a past history in which we find Oudin abducted Beti. Major characters of the novel such as Oudin, Kaiser and Hassan are all reborn. The first character who experiences the consciousness after death is Oudin. Like other characters of Harris in the other novel, the character of Oudin has many facets. When Beti, the major female character in the novel, meets Oudin for the first time, he appears to be strange to her and she had a feeling that he resembled someone she had seen before. Oudin resemble the past Oudin who was killed by the three brothers – Kaiser, Mohammed, Hassan along their cousin Rajah (present father of Beti). Yet, the process of re-birth took place with Hassan and Kaiser. Kaiser was reborn as a Negro Wood Cutter who meets Beti and Oudin in the forest. Hassan becomes a fisherman on reincarnation. Mohammed and his brothers killed Oudin in order to acquire the land which was supposed to be inherited by their half brother Oudin in the past. On the deeper level, the implication is that, Harris is concerned for the need of a new 'vision of consciousness' – a Caribbean man who will be the true heir of the land. Michael Gilkes stated –

The theme of dominion, of the tyrannical authority of history and sterile materialism, is merely part of the larger design of the book in which the Indian peasant girl, Beti (like Mariella of Palace of the Peacock), represents the Folk, the land, authentic Being, Ram (like Donne), the spiritual, unsubstantial but quickening essence. Ram, Oudin and Beti – the triaprima of the novel, are introduced on the first few pages. Indeed this novel also opens with a dream and a death, and the symbolic framework of the book is suggested by the description of Oudin's death as part of the cycle of nature itself... (49)

At one point of the novel, Beti effort of screaming: "Oudin death, Oudin death, Oudin death" (13) introduces the real world of the book as the rest of the novel happens in a flashback. The novel can be seen as a visionary framework and the unsentimental description of the bereaved Beti who reveals her eagerness to be free from the act of slavery. Beti is presented as a woman who is rejected by the society and is leading a life without home and without friends but the child she carries gives her 'a promise for a new beginning'. Harris describe her in the text, "She had the refined emaciated face of an East Indian and Guianese woman that looked older than it was, bearing the stamp of a well-known ornament... the stamp of timeless slavery" (13-14). Following Ram's instruction, Oudin kidnaps Beti but

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makes her his own bride and thus, this shows his effort to abandon his former role as a slave. Harris main concerned in his work is to free oneself from the burden of slavery and domination. His interest in African and Amerindian legends and mythology as a whole lies in his belief in history as discontinuous series of events which happens in the novel.

The central theme in the novel is to incorporate the hidden elements through an imaginative re-structuring and re-integration of the psyche through an impulse towards the 'wholeness of vision'. Michael Gilkes finally announced in his work-

The final section of the novel, which there is a second death by fire... is entitled, paradoxically, 'second birth.' The apocalyptic epigraph from Blake: '... all things have second birth: the earthquake is not satisfied at once, is followed, however, by one from the Bible which promises release from the bondage to nature and man: '... the dayspring from on high hath visited us.' The hope for the future appears in the shape of the quiet, child-like, illiterate Beti. Pregnant with Oudin's child, she is the womb of the future like brooding forest itself with which she is linked. (Gilkes, 57)

The Whole Armour which is the third novel of the Guyana Quartet, Jelinek writes –

The novel evokes the symbolic birth of a people from the "womb" of the exile Abram, their failure to assume responsibility for their development as a community, and their potential redemption through the sacrifice of Cristo. (Jelinek, 103)

In last novel of the Guyana Quartet, *The Secret Ladder*, the protagonist Fenwick is seen in his Journey in the upper reaches of the Canje River along with his crew who represents many races of Guyana-

Weng, the Amerindian, Chiung, the Chinese, Perez, the Portuguese, Bryant, the African, Stoll, the mulatto, Van Brock, the tall black man, can be seen as the representatives of the ethnic groups which compose the nations of Guyana. Fenwick synthesizes this wide diversity within himself since he has African, Amerindian, and European ancestors (Durix, 29).

Harris tries to juxtapose art and science in the novel where the former consist of the essential quality in giving shape and meaning to chaos and on the scientific level, it refers to the scientific expedition which is the surface aim of the journey up to the Canje river of Guyana where Fenwick's crew use ladder-like gauges to measure the different levels of the water. However, Harris believed that both are insufficient one without the other. This is seen when to his surprise, Fenwick realise that his work was actually about the historic, sociological and psychological problems and not only with the clear mission of making of the maps and the hydrological significance. In constructing the dam, the men are aware that it would destroy the basin, an area where a group of Negroes lived. For them, the destruction of the infertile area would not be any major loss but for the Negroes it means a threat of losing their homeland. But, Fenwick, while "measuring external data scientifically on the ladder of his gauges, comes to the realisation that the rivers of Guiana are ladders of the history of the country" (Howard, 56).

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The Negroes created many obstacles and problems for the men in order to save their land. As Durix puts, “Yet the land symbolizes the hard-won freedom which the rebellious Africans gained in the face of slavery and repeated attacks by the armed forces” (Durix, 28). Characters in the novel are part of evolutionary process. The crew have been changed by a number of events which took place over a period of seven days. In the course of the journey, they are faced with internal quarrels which ultimately lead to the possibility of a truer bond of community. The implications is clear-

Harris here suggests that any solution to the history of ethnic oppression which has plagued the Caribbean for centuries cannot lie in one group ignoring the needs of the others. The author sees the necessity to break down all fixed structures in order to reach a deeper and richer form of intercourse (Durix, 29).

The quotations which open the book present the hidden meaning of the novel. The first quotation taken from Blake’s poem- “with our vegetable eyes we view...visions” point out the division of spirit and flesh and indicates that Harris will begin the novel with vegetable eye. The second quotation from Mayer, “There is in nature, a specific dimension of immaterial constitution which preserves its value in all changes, whereas its form of appearance alters in the most manifold ways”.

This logical statement presents the theme of the book which according to Harris is not absurd and not the immaterial symbolic experience. The third quotation from Macmurray-“It is indeed an integration of the movements of the agent with the movements of the Other, so that in action the self and the Other form a unity” specifies the mode of the final resolution. Fenwick’s effort to handle his crew and the situation at the time of measuring the water level of the Canje River scientifically reveals Fenwick’s plans of the rational conscious and civilized world. From the beginning of the novel, Harris clearly point out that the Guyanese river become ‘the curious rungs in a ladder on which one sets one’s musing foot again and again, to climb into both the past and the future of the continent of mystery’ (22). In the novel, an old man named Poseidon, who was once known as the God of river and the leader of a group of Negroes, turns to be the 'Black King of history whose sovereignty over the past was a fluid crown of possession and dispossession' (22). Howard marks- “Poseidon, then, becomes for Fenwick the real challenge on the secret ladder of conscience” (57) or a personification of the moral sense of right and wrong. In the letter Fenwick writes to his mother, Poseidon becomes the symbol of 'an abortive movement, the emotional and political germ of which has been abused in two centuries of history . . . the emotional dynamic of liberation that happened a century and a quarter ago', a movement that was 'all too emotional, too blinding, this freedom that has turned cruel, abortive, evasive, woolly and wild everywhere almost' (38 – 39).

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