

**CENTRE FOR GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**

**The University of the West Indies**

**WORKING PAPER SERIES– St. Augustine Unit**

**“Like Bush Fire in My Arms”:  
Interrogating the World of Caribbean Romance**

**© Paula Morgan**

**Working Paper No. 5**

**May 2002**

**CENTRE FOR GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**  
**The University of the West Indies**  
**WORKING PAPER SERIES– St. Augustine Unit**

**“Like Bush Fire in My Arms”:  
Interrogating the World of Caribbean Romance**  
© Paula Morgan

**Working Paper No. 5**  
**May 2002**

**Editorial Committee:**

- |                                 |   |  |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Dr. Paula Morgan</b>         | - | <b>Lecturer, Department of Liberal Arts, UWI,<br/>St. Augustine Campus</b> |
| <b>Dr. Valerie Youssef</b>      | - | <b>Lecturer, Department of Liberal Arts, UWI<br/>St. Augustine Campus</b>  |
| <b>Ms. Annette Knight</b>       | - | <b>Librarian, UWI Main Library,<br/>St. Augustine Campus</b>               |
| <b>Dr. Margaret Rouse-Jones</b> | - | <b>Librarian, UWI Main Library,<br/>St. Augustine Campus</b>               |

**ISBN: 976-620-158-7**

**Published by the St. Augustine Unit, Centre for Gender and Development Studies,  
The University of the West Indies, Trinidad & Tobago**

## EDITORIAL NOTE

**The Working Paper Series of the Centre for Gender and Development Studies attempts to encourage scholars and activists in the field of gender and development studies in publishing work in progress. While it naturally invites the work of established scholars, it is also geared for advanced students who are beginning to write and formulate ideas and new areas of research in gender and feminist-related subjects. In addition, the series intends to maintain linkages between intellectual work and practical activities being carried out by women and men in gender related fields.**

**The Working Paper Series is a cross-campus initiative for the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, which has teaching and research units located on each of the campuses of the University of the West Indies.**

"LIKE BUSH FIRE IN MY ARMS"  
INTERROGATING THE WORLD OF CARIBBEAN ROMANCE<sup>1</sup>

The early 1990s added a new event to the Caribbean literary scene. We have been ushered into "a world of Caribbean Romance" - mass produced fiction in a *Caribbean Caresses Series* commissioned by multi-national sellers of romances. This development, motivated in part by the promise of a lucrative market, has raised salient issues. These include the interplay between the formulaic narrative and the individual expressions offered by the Caribbean writers; the fictional portrayals of gender constructs and their impact on the negotiation of the heterosexual unions within this diverse social milieu.

The formulaic romance made its debut in 1950, when it was launched by Harlequin to swiftly become a publishing phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> According to Hubbard, of the 575 million paperbacks sold in the United States in a given year, 40% are brand name romances. And it certainly is women's fiction. Of the 100 plus category romances which are published monthly, the majority are authored by women for a female market. They rank as first choice among non-college educated readership and second choice among a college educated readership. *Caribbean Caresses* is a recent addition to the extended family which includes *Harlequin American Romance*, *Second Chance at Love*, *Silhouette Desire*, *Silhouette Intimate Moments*, *Candlelight Ecstasy Supreme*.

Why does romance continue to have such a pervasive hold on the human imagination? Why does each society, even the most realistic, the most cynical, insist on creating its own romantic fantasies? Why do peoples who live in the shadow of the cloud which mushroomed over Hiroshima, or, to bring the analogy closer home, who daily grapple with the legacy of slavery and the challenges posed by poverty, dispossession, social unrest, and homelessness continue to mass produce idealized fictions. Barron claims:

Romance, though we scarcely recognize it, is so much with us, penetrating so many aspects of our lives, that the objective attention needed to define it confuses

and embarrasses us.... Masters of science, manipulators of birth and makers of mass death, we dream of flight, from a polluted earth to clean new worlds beyond the stars, calling it romance and rivalling each other to make it reality. Confused by the complexity of its forms- ideal or identity, escapist fantasy or a facet of reality, reasonable aspiration or a delusory aspect of human temperament? -and bemused by our own ambivalence towards it we equate romance with fiction, fiction with falsehood, and flick through True Romance on the bookstall without noticing the contradiction in terms. (1)

It is not surprising that the term 'romance' eludes easy definition. According to the *Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*: "A term which can encompass the medieval narrative poem, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Gothic horrors and sentimental pap for the mass market is bound to be difficult to define" (Fowler 1973). Originally coined to designate that form of Vulgar Latin adopted by the Western regions of the Roman Empire as their vernacular, "Romanz came to distinguish the vernacular from the classical language, then the secular texts written in it from learned writings in Latin, then particular types of literature favoured by the lay aristocracy who were the patrons of the age." (Barron 1). The term was first applied to the emergent romantic genre in France, where it continued to be "widely and loosely used."

Today's sentimental romances for the mass market can claim noble forebears. They are "pumpkin vine" relatives of the medieval romance - non-didactic narratives of ideal love and chivalric adventure.<sup>2</sup> The Bronte sisters masterfully penned prose romances in which the didactic social world of the novel of manners is exploded by the elemental - sexuality, fear, and the darker side of the subconscious mind - larger than life isolated protagonists and near incredible situations which threaten to upset the social and moral order. Heathcliff (*Wuthering Heights*) and Edward Rochester (*Jane Eyre*) are forerunners of the teeth-grinding, masterful, passionate, dark heroes of today's sentimental romances. Rooted in a visionary perspective of ideal reality, the romance is also associated with folk

tales and fairy stories which reject mimetic representation and weave through highly standardized, repetitious formulas, possibilities of transcendence in the face of fundamental adversities. Their devices are repetition, magical transformations, shape shifting, iconography. Their terrain is the subconscious domain - dream, fantasy, aspirations, desires, wish fulfilment.

The romance is securely fixed in that nebulous space between "apparent reality and actual ideality". Barron identifies its essential qualities as a genre, traces of which have been preserved in pulp romances - as a quest for "love, honour, valour, fear, self-knowledge". Its conventional motifs are "the mysterious challenge or summons to a mission, the lonely journey through hostile territory, the first sight of the beloved, the single combat against overwhelming odds, or a monstrous opponent." The quest - whether pursued on horseback or through spaceship is "to some extent symbolic", the settings extraordinary and exotic, and the characters essentially representational rather than individual, "essentially stereotypes in service of its didactic purpose". (6)

The romance in its myriad forms has faced criticism based on moral issues -- its power to seduce the individual into "applying its values, appropriate enough to the artificial world treated by the writer, to a real world in which pain has genuine sharpness and the romantic pose is little more than a pallid gesture" (Fowler 209). Pulp romance for mass consumption has been criticized by feminists for the manner in which its gender-based power relations are negotiated in heterosexual unions to trap women into social and sexual subordination. They have been labelled as "corrosive and stereotyping narratives which invite the reader to identify with a passive heroine who finds true happiness in submitting to a masterful male."

The traditional romance novel encodes submission to sadism and suffering as the appropriate avenue to prepare a young girl for adulthood. The ultimate objective of the romance novel is marriage which is associated with the relinquishment of any sense of

autonomy and acceptance of a severely circumscribed role limited exclusively to the domestic sphere. Yet romances do provide fascinating insights into culturally fashioned courtship rituals, and the interplay of social constructs of masculinity and femininity. Finally, the romance for popular market, which, in an ambivalent manner, valorizes female sexuality as an avenue of empowerment, incurs displeasure because of the issue of whether its consumers, who tend to be predominantly teenagers emerging into womanhood, and middle-aged women on the brink of seniority, have a right to pre-packaged, vicarious pleasure in solitary intercourse with the text.

Clearly romance and its fictions answer a basic human need and will conceivably grow in significance the grimmer global socio-political scenarios become. Indeed we occasionally indulge in mass transnational fairy tale delusions - an outstanding example being the Charles and Diana drama. So deep is the psychological need to affirm the existence of romantic love and its potential to grant life happily ever after, that the spectacular failure of that union simply fuels the necessity for another such mass fantasy.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, this particular creative expression is formulated against a background of an increasing propensity among Caribbean as well as African-American and African writers to name marriage and heterosexual unions, as presently constituted, as a major plank of the oppressive structures erected against women. The creative writers contend that these structures must be demolished, if women are to find affirmation and a space in which to flourish. (Morgan 1994).

It is within this framework that the *Caribbean Caresses* series has emerged. What then is a Caribbean romance? Caribbean authorship is a defining characteristic. The series published in 1993 comprises *Sun Valley Romance* by Valerie Belgrave, *Heartache & Roses* by Dorothy Jolly, *Fantasy of Love* by Deidre D'Allan, *Love in Hiding* by Annette Charles, *Hand in Hand* by Lynn-Ann Ali, and *Merchant of Dreams* written by a male author under the pseudonym Lucille Colleton. I will also discuss Belgrave's *Ti Marie*

(1988), an ambitious historical romance which is way beyond the scope of the *Carences* series, and has been firmly located by critics within a growing body of 'serious' women's literature from the Caribbean.<sup>4</sup>

A definite innovation appears to be the creation of protagonists who reflect the multi-ethnic composition of this region's peoples. This can only be a service, given the extent to which the denigration of the ethnicities of the Caribbean peoples continues to assault the self-image and self-perception of generations of young West Indians. One can expect these novels, at the very least, to undermine the myth that only Caucasian women can be beautiful. Instead of a monochromatic white hue relieved by the occasional hard-won and transient tan, think of the diverse palettes of coffee and cream shades, a multiplicity of shapes, an array of ethnic variations. What better mode within which to celebrate the erotic delights of generous breasts and bottoms, full figures and lips? The possibilities available should be endless - but are they?

Some of the offerings - Belgrave's and Jolly's for example - successfully incorporate the unique charms of their racially mixed beauties, complete with slanted eyes and high cheekbones which reveal traces of Oriental and Amerindian ancestry respectively. Ali's text portrays the delicate beauty of her Indian protagonist and creates out of the midnight-black past waist length hair, a multifaceted symbol. It represents her troubled past - her hair blazed when her Uncle thrust her into a fire because she witnessed his murder of her father; her sexual allure, particularly dear to her suitor who entertains that horrific memory of her burning hair and is grateful for her survival; her independence, when in adulthood she cuts her hair, and excises with it excises the burdens of her troubled childhood.

In some of the texts though, curious permutations remain. Whereas the dark-skinned hero dovetails neatly with the bronzed Caucasian hero of the traditional formulaic romance, the requirements for female beauty are far more stringent, leading to peculiar



formulations. Colleton's full-breasted and round-bellied protagonist is severely embarrassed by her body and one of the tasks of her lover is to gently convince her to relinquish her low self-esteem. Charles' heroine may be brown of skin, yet her face, which is "a legacy from her Spanish ancestors, was that of a Renaissance painting of the Madonna" (Charles 1). In this case, the darkness is, in a literal sense, no more than skin deep; every other feature remains Caucasian in ancestry and in construction.

Messages inscribed by the body play a key role in romantic fictions which hinge on the successful resolution of the marriage plot despite apparently insurmountable obstacles, many of which are erected by that gulf between what the speakers say and the reality which their bodies encode. There is the enduring assumption that a man's ability to sexually arouse a woman proves that she is in love with him, despite what she may say. Additionally, the true love is he who effortlessly arouses the heroine sexually by his mere presence or the brush of his hand against hers. These fictions allow no space between sex as a bodily response and love which requires a commitment of body, soul and spirit. There is no lust in these fictional worlds. Romance writers often exploit what Farrel terms "incivility and its associates embarrassment and confusion, as signs of love, in a resort to "involuntarity" (126).

In the traditional romance peopled by Caucasians, the blush is particularly useful to betray the body's involuntary response which invariably runs counter to verbal assertions. As if to compensate for having "mahogany-brown" skin, D'Allan's protagonist blushes with amazing regularity, at the slightest provocation. But as if to prove that it is possible, the blushing is constantly referred to in self-affirming, if not apologetic terms:

Confused, she felt herself blushing.

'Are you blushing, then?' he said, laughing softly. 'Or is it just the light from the fire that's giving you that glow? And do you know that some people believe that dark-skinned people don't blush.' (D'Allan 12)

Indeed the blush is such a useful and persistent indicator of purity, it replaces virginity as a measure of innocence after the couple have indulged in pre-marital intercourse: "He turned to her and said, 'That smile on your face, Erica, is all the assurance I need.' And then as she blushed he laughed. 'Are you blushing, woman, after the event you're blushing?'" (122). This protagonist is intensely self-reflexive about blushing and, for that matter, every intense emotional state required to keep the fantasy at slow boil. Apart from the recurrent "she blushed, she knew she did", self-reflexive narrative devices create distance between the protagonist and the heightened emotional experiences. Fleeing from the suitor who unexpectedly appears in an isolated place and whom she mistakes for a rapist, Erica questions herself: "Had she screamed? the man was bending over her. Now she knew she screamed" (57). D'Allan's work illustrates the danger of importing formulaic responses and like newcomers to the club anxious for acceptance, using them to the point of absurdity. Nowhere is this more clearly indicated than in the use of stilted dialogue, and of culturally inappropriate language, expressions and situations.

Setting also appears to be a major criterion of Caribbeanness although this is not an exclusive marker. The Caribbean with its waving palm trees, beautiful beaches and exotic festivals has long been an idyllic fantasy retreat and setting for this brand of fiction. Indeed the projection of an idyllic Caribbean is a key marketing strategy for the kind of tourism for which the islands are famous. In *Heartache and Roses*, *Fantasy of Love* and *Love in Hiding* - the writers have, in keeping with generic constraints, heightened the beautiful and erased the ugly. Indeed these writers work diligently and often self-consciously to reshape the Caribbean to fit the realm of "romantic" fantasy.

*Heartache and Roses*, set in the island of Tobago, invokes the touristic notion of a Caribbean setting: "The hotel, chosen for her by a travel agent, was modest but the setting was perfect". (2) The text which is thematically weak and unfocussed, portrays a moody, older man, with children, whose accident and hospitalization help to eliminate

the major barrier - the heroine's barrenness. The plot unfolds in the midst of a range of tropical blooms - poui, ixora, hibiscus and anthuriums, alemandas and chaconia. Yet the setting remains very superficial indeed - a Caribbean-styled overlay which can be peeled away and replaced with, say, an Australian, Hawaiian or any other "exotic" environment.

D'Allan goes a step further in her description of the Jamaican hills:

This was limestone country which had weathered into an area of hills and depressions. As a child she'd thought it must be like the enchanted lands of story books - hills peeping up out of the mists. Now she just wanted to sit on top of the hill and revel in the beauty of her enchanted land as the sun broke through the mists to reveal the view in all its morning green glory. The mists swirled around her like friendly ghosts as she climbed the hillside to her favourite spot (56).<sup>5</sup>

Rather than celebrate the distinctiveness of the Caribbean landscape, the writers attempt to yoke the landscape into the "romantic story book" image. This seems diametrically opposed to the sentiments which prior to 1970 motivated Merle Hodge initially to wield her pen to record our fiction, our story book world in protest against the arrogant assumptions, "that I and my world were nothing and that to rescue ourselves from nothingness we had best seek admission to their story book world" ( Hodge 202).

In terms of social settings, the writers do include some of the common patterns of interactions within the domestic enclosure. Jolly introduces the theme of the exploitative, promiscuous son and manipulative, domineering, potential mother-in-law as the obstacle to the union with the rival male. D'Allan makes mention of the stereotype of the "tallawah" indomitable Caribbean woman. The hero of *Fantasy of Love* has been negatively affected by his mother, "the typical strong, controlling, West Indian woman" but the writer is careful not to undercut this type. The heroine's propensity towards independence and self reliance is seen as inimical to the love relationship but not sufficiently so to cause her to behave differently..."She had to be herself" (135). The wider

social realities remain severely locked out of the fictional framework. Although D'Allan's protagonist is involved in continuing education aimed at alleviating social and educational discrepancies within the adult population, the social realities remain peripheral to the novel. The exclusive concern of the fictional universe, as is also the case with Charles' and Jolly's offerings, is love and its many entanglements. Charles exploits quite effectively the tensions between the Indian arranged marriage as opposed to the love match and the preference within this social grouping for intra-racial marital unions.

The male-authored text by Colleton incorporates wider social realities. In *Merchant of Dreams* there are references to the theft of washing off the line, small cramped housing developments, unemployed men who wash cars unrequested in the hope of making small change to feed hungry families, unsavoury hotel rooms. Indeed the frame of this text is decidedly unglamorous. There is no slim, elegant, virginal heroine. Her former lover was prone to alcoholism and promiscuity and inclined to borrow money without returning it. The protagonist's round, dark-brown face is unadorned, her nails short and unpolished and she is overweight such that the man of her dreams has to purchase a flattering swim suit to convince her that her body can be appealing in swim wear.

Predictably, given the constraints of the genre, this novel is the most unsuccessful of the five - because it is too real. It also suffers because of long descriptive passages on the fabrication of fantasies, which undercuts the glitz and glitter and unveils the essential dishonesty of the advertising world. But this may also be read as deconstructing the idealized world of romance. The tightening and relaxation of the sexual tension, jealousy, fear of rejection, incipient violence which Charles handles masterfully in *Love In Hiding* never surface in *Merchant of Dreams*. The realities of the world to which Colleton seeks to be faithful undercut the illusion of romance. It would be interesting in the long term to compare this text to other male-authored *Caribbean Caresses*, should they emerge.

Belgrave is more successful at conveying the Caribbean physical and social milieu, yet satisfying the formulaic requirements of the genre. In *Sun Valley Romance*, Belgrave deliberately interweaves issues of individual and social responsibility, questioning in the process, the class structures which underlie all category romances to ensure that the male protagonists are wealthy, powerful, well established in promising careers and therefore are socially desirable options for impecunious, beautiful and sensitive young women. Indeed, underlying the traditional romance is a stringent requirement of male power and ascendancy which the woman accepts. She imparts complementarity, tenderness and nurturance to the relationship and gains in the process upward mobility, financial security and the promise of unabated love and passion.

*Sun Valley Romance* is a far more interesting study of class relations than it is of gender relations. The love between the company magnate Gary and the beautiful, talented, impoverished young girl Giselle faces its greatest test when she discovers that he is head of a conglomerate which includes the firm whose quarrying has transformed their village into a barren, dust and disease-ridden ecological disaster. The climactic event is a life-threatening flood which severely damages property and kills a young child. Belgrave's innovation is to constrain the reader to recognize the link between individual wealth and prestige and the social injustice and exploitation on which it is founded. The hero dare not approach the protagonist for a resolution until he has displayed his resolve to use his power and prestige to alleviate the environmental problem and to cause his firm to act as a responsible corporate citizen.

Gary Henshaw is portrayed as masculine and sexually desirable yet sensitive, uncertain as to his role as a business magnate, preferring to pursue a more creative though less lucrative career. There is a tenuous humility to his advances. The typecast obstacles to their union - the rival (the rich, white, [bleached] blond, heiress) and the interfering mother are overcome almost as soon as they appear. Rather than display male arrogance,

this hero courts his lover openly and generously displays his vulnerability from the onset and repeatedly confesses his fear of losing her.

On the other hand, Giselle is talented and capable. Although her career advancement is related to his wealth, she displays the potential to succeed without his patronage. To balance the scenario, he remains estranged from her after her unjustified denouncement of his complicity in the village's disaster, long enough for her to regret the way her hastiness has threatened their love and happiness. Their final reconciliation is engineered in part by her grandmother who is ever present throughout the text dispensing pithy folk wisdom and guiding the young people towards each other. In this scenario, there is no lasting division between the (female) affective domain and the (male) domain of power relations.

Belgrave's narrative displays the greatest potential for innovation within the generic form. Her accomplishment is to work the broader social and thematic concerns so intricately into the relationship, that it lets some air into what can become an airless, suffocating, domestic space. Moreover, she has done so effectively enough to escape the editor's pen ever ready to limit length and slash "irrelevance". Although Jensen in her examination of the evolution of the thematic concerns over four decades noted a growing propensity to introduce more socially realistic themes and situations, she concludes:

The outstanding characteristics of this love are magic and transformation. Magic works to solve all problems: neither intellectual activity, the passage of time, frequent interactions, nor hard work are required for the development of a healthy relationship and the blending of personalities. Any problem of character, misunderstanding, or incompatible goals evaporates rapidly in the fire of love over a period of days, weeks, or months. And there are no problems beyond the relational. Economic, political, racial, sociological, or philosophical considerations do not intrude (485).

Not so in *Sun Valley Romance*. Belgrave's intrusion of current economic and social issues roots this text most firmly in the social milieu. Although the love relationship remains pivotal, its successful resolution is contingent on far broader concerns. Additionally, there is a subtext which hints at the Sleeping Beauty transformation identified by Gilbert and Gubar - and that is the process by which the talented nobody with a pretty face becomes transformed into the rich, successful, potentially heartless business magnate. The interactions between Gary Henshaws' mother and Giselle, the emerging business woman, play upon these possibilities.

Apart from their treatment of the Caribbean reality, what have these writers done with the basic formula of romantic fiction? Nachbar and Lause comment: "Audiences experience an example of a specific formula more in terms of their implicit knowledge of the formula itself than with reference to a real world or a unique artifact or event". (417) Hubbard, tracing the development of formulaic visions of male/female relationships in over 40 years, examines gender constructs, particular fantasy themes and contemporary attitudes to romance in the four decades since the inception of category romances.

The predominant vision of the 1950s was of Cinderella as virgin earth mother and the prince as benign dictator. The novels of this time concurred with the rigid dichotomy - the instrumental male and expressive female formula. The union was based on complementarity with the hero bringing wealth, power and social status and the woman adding expressive potential and emotional richness, without which the hero for all his superiority would remain deficient. The 1960s saw the Cinderella as feisty female with the prince as subduer. The average plot dealt with female rebellion and struggle followed by acquiescence. This scenario allows some play for the female's awareness of social inequity; however, her failure and acceptance of male dominance is built into the scenario.

The 1970s typically featured Cinderella as the virgin temptress and the prince as warrior. The plot operates to constrain the heroine to acknowledge female sexuality and militancy which emerge as a threat to her and to her lover's happiness and security. The typical novel of the period defines "a woman's thrust for equality and labels it dangerous and promises equality for those who accept complementary relationship styles". The counterstatement to her liberation includes verbal and physical violence. The formulaic vision of the 1980s constituted a marked departure with the introduction of "a new base of fantasy themes drawn from the feminist perspective: female control, male acceptance of equality between the sexes and negotiation of relationship terms" (Hubbard: 483). Exit the shy, insecure, clinging vine! Enter the self-assured, well-educated, sexually confident woman. Exit the arrogant, power-bent, chauvinist! Enter the articulate, sensitive lover who recognizes and leaves space for female potential and ambition.

*Caribbean Caresses* reflects each of these formulaic visions. Charles' *Love in Hiding*, which is quite compelling indeed, is very much in keeping with the visions of the fifties and sixties. This novel embodies a most dangerous propensity of this genre, given its formative influences on its teenage readership. Charles provides all that is required in terms of plot and formulaic construction and perhaps a bit more. *Love in Hiding* plays on several dimensions of Caribbean family life - the potential for romantic engagement between with the boy next door and the young pesky girl gone to woman; a burgeoning sexual interest of an older man for a girl young enough and close enough in terms of fictive kinship ties, for it to be conceived of as incestuous and perverse; an apparent attempt at rape which signals the change in the pattern of relations between the couple; and even male/male, father/son sexual tensions. The fictive kinship is sufficiently intense that the young man/fictive brother/seducer physically fights his father/ the surrogate father/avenger, over the right to pursue relations with the protagonist.

Charles handles the basic contradictions masterfully - simmering sexuality combined with a girlish innocence, a spiritedness combined with helplessness. The protagonist habitually



falls asleep on drives as was her habit as a child, and needs to be lifted out of cars, changed and tucked into bed; moreover, she is often being fed on trays and given drinks which her suitor needs to hold to her lips. This incapacity and girlish innocence fuels her simmering sexuality which is constantly threatening to erupt at his touch.

The compelling nature of this offering becomes all the more dangerous as the young man Thierry becomes the primary caregiver to the child Rena, usurping the role of the grandmother who is relegated to the margins of the text. The fact that he regularly watches over her, soothes and cares for her when she is ill, makes it all the more credible that the twenty-one year old young man should become the custodian of the developing sexuality of the fifteen year old girl. When the youngster attracts vigorous sexual advances of a drunken admirer at a party, Thierry punishes her for inciting rape by putting her over his lap and soundly spanking her bottom "for behaving like a tramp". And thereafter, having crossed the thin dividing line between control of female sexuality and sexual violence, his attempts at comfort also change into passion.

Predictably the young girl considers his violent action to be totally justified punishment for her guilt and she is thereafter burdened with a dark secret - which has a passive dimension - that she is sexually appealing which is the cause of the initial assault; and an active dimension - that she is capable of passionate sexual arousal which she discovers in Thierry's embrace. This guilt, which is ripened during her incarceration in a convent as a result of the infraction, impacts her relationship to all other men. Even more alarming is the fact that Thierry becomes the internalized regulator of her sexual activity, the inner custodian of her virtue - she is haunted as she seeks intimacy with the rival, her fiancé Raj: "In their closest moments Thierry's face would rise before her." In adult courtship dance between Rena and Thierry, the correlation between violence and sexuality continues unabated:

....he bullied her mercilessly (28)

She pulled away violently and swung her right hand at his face. He neatly sidestepped and caught her hand in mid-air. He twisted her arm up behind her bringing her very close to him (33)

'Rena?' he asked softly 'Are you afraid of me?'

'Yes' she whispered ashamed, eyes downcast.

'You damn well should be!' (65)

Then he kissed her angrily. She fought him silently. His teeth savaged her lips and she was forced to open her mouth. She would have bruises tomorrow, she knew. Never a placid girl she nipped his tongue in sharp retaliation. (84)

There is another dangerous element which one might wish to attribute to the verbal extravagances common to the genre, if it did not repeatedly play itself out, often with fatal consequences, in the truth that is stranger than fiction. It is the assumption that male-female love is the ultimate reality that places one beyond all moral constraint. Says Thierry:

'You belong to me. Where you're concerned I revert to primitive man. You're my woman. I'm your man and heaven help anyone who comes between.'

After that admission which every girl secretly longs to hear, she just had to kiss him again and again. (134)

Charles does make minimal use of that space permitted by the romance to interrogate the order which it will eventually affirm, when Rena states defiantly that slavery has ended and people no longer own people. This notwithstanding, the valorization in idealized romantic fiction of the male's right or even responsibility to impose chastisement and to

control the sexuality of the errant female, in the name of love, is nothing short of subversive in a society which is reeling under the impact of domestic violence.

Moreover, it is retrogressive in terms of the developments defined by Hubbard, more in keeping with the formulaic vision of the 1950's - Cinderella as virgin earth mother/ prince as dictator model, with dashes of the 1960's vision- Cinderella as feisty female with prince as subduer. In this scenario, Cinderella eventually becomes the joyful recipient of the act of subjection. In *Love in Hiding*, the final submission eliminates all of the woman's decision-making capability. The ominous cast of the novel persists to the end:

' I'll have to lock you away ' he said deeply.

'Thierry, I love you. There's no need to go to extremes. I'll never want anyone else.'

'I know but when I'm sure no one can steal you away I'll be much happier. (140)

At the other end of the spectrum are Belgrave's and Ali's offerings. *Sun Valley Romance* extends beyond the formulaic vision of the 1980's. Moreover, its successful incorporation of social issues into the resolution of the romantic plot may well point to contemporary directions and fantasy themes of the nineties. Ali's *Hand in Hand* displays the contradictions inherent in attaining gendered subjectivity within a restrictive social framework. Ali's text which includes murder and psychological intrigue, plays with several of the stereotypical notions and cultural definitions of Indian ethnicity within Trinidadian society. The six-year old girl and the twelve-year old boy next door witness her uncle's violent act against his brother's household. Andel is exiled by his father to keep him out of Trinidad - an act which the child perceives as betrayal and rejection. He returns twelve years later when his father is dying to trigger in Khadija's mind the suppressed memories of the event, resolve the murder case and win her love.

Ali simultaneously exploits and deconstructs stereotypical notions of Indian ethnicity in a manner which emphasizes gender polarities. The intrigue and the characterization of uncle affirm a stereotype of Indian male as inclined towards exploitation, greed and violence, even to the extent of despoiling intimate family bonds. The father's fond but foolish indulgence of his younger brother is responsible for his death. Even the ideal young lover Andel refuses to forgive his dying father for his act of desertion.

But Ali decisively demolishes the stereotype of the passive Indian woman whose ultimate objective is to please her partner. Khadija is often robed in traditional Muslim wear but she is anything but the traditional bride. Indeed much of the turmoil and distress in the love relationship is borne by Andel when she experiences repeated memory losses. The successful resolution of the love plot between these doctors of medicine and linguistics respectively is subject to negotiations concerning her career and her preference to live in Trinidad. Eventually the couple settle in Tobago after Andel sacrifices his London career. She has been too busy earning degrees to learn how to cook; rather he turns out the rotis and leaps out of bed to make fried bakes for her breakfast. He professes his love early and is thereafter steadfast in his devotion; she withholds any such profession until the closing pages of the text and admits it only after he begs for that assurance.

Ali's *Fantasy of Love* is a cleverly disguised fantasy of female empowerment and control - a reversal of the stereotype of the Muslim woman and also of the traditional formulaic scenario. Compare for example the ending of *Love in Hiding* in which Rena voices the unconditional acquiescence:

'No matter what the rest of the world does you're mine and I am yours, beyond death.'

She could find no argument with such sentiments.

'Yes Thierry,' she agreed blissfully. (140)

Conversely in *Hand in Hand*, it is the male character who says "Anything you want, sweet Khadija. I say yes to anything. Just make it soon" (119). Note though that the fantasy of female control is neatly encapsulated within a celebration of several gracious dimensions of traditional Indian culture - forms of address, food, clothing. No element which can be perceived as detracting from the individual's freedom of choice in the love relationship is included. Ali's fantasy engages and challenges the qualities commonly associated with female, gendered, subjectivity within the Trinidadian Muslim community, while preserving the facade of traditionalism.

The *Caribbean Caresses* series fulfils the conservative demands of the marriage plot in diverse ways. The more traditional novels affirm cultural values of male dominance and female submission with minimal interrogation of this order. The more progressive affirm marriage but as the outcome of negotiation between highly educated and/or socially aware, independent parties. There is also wide variation in the portrayal of gender constructs within the social milieu. This may indicate that whereas issues concerning the quest for female identity and self-affirmation have made some impact on shaping gender constructs in the Caribbean, there are still those who would appropriate concepts of masculinity and femininity which were common four decades ago and more suited to the metropolitan framework from which these formulaic romances take their model, than to the complex Caribbean social milieu.

At the first international conference of Caribbean women writers held in 1988, Merle Hodge called for a development of a "modern tradition of popular literature to counterbalance the easily accessible paperback novel" that comes to us from the metropolis. She argues that although such an idea may be controversial it does not necessarily involve "a complete compromise of literary standards" citing as precedents the Onitsha Market Literature of Nigeria and the fact that much of what is perceived as mainstream classical literature today began as fiction geared for "a mass audience rather than a highly educated elite" (*Caribbean Women Writers* 207). Indeed the wealth of the

Caribbean is undoubtedly located in its popular culture and the gap between high culture and low culture has not been as drastic in the Caribbean as it has been in other cultures.<sup>66</sup>

In North America, the gap between high culture and low culture has been ably breached by novelists such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker whose works fall comfortably into both categories. Since Hodge's appeal, the *Caribbean Caresses* has hit the press. Although Ali and Belgrave have demonstrated the potential for pushing back formulaic constraints to introduce revisionary dimensions into the traditional form, it remains debatable whether these formulaic romances fulfil our needs, reflect the complexity of our social milieu, and ultimately empower the Caribbean peoples.

The final novel to be examined is a far more complex form of romance which has emerged - forging a new a space within which the creative imagination can celebrate the tangible, vital and positive aspects of Caribbean life. The year 1988 saw the publication of Valerie Belgrave's *Ti Marie*, a significant novel of female development. Set in the Trinidad of the late eighteenth century and written in the genre of historical romance, *Ti Marie* was created to fulfil an ideological objective. According to Belgrave, "[m]y artistic purpose... is a deliberate attempt to ennoble my country and its people, to promote racial tolerance...and to challenge the corrosion of our psyche and culture caused by the foreign mass media" (317). She chose the genre of the historical romance and the fairy tale because of its popular appeal in the West Indies. Possibly, Belgrave did not expect the novel to face the sustained glare of the literary critic or, even if it did, to be assessed as anything other than a fairy tale set among beautiful people, in a land of compelling beauty, inhabited by protagonists who are essentially enchanted because of "their liberalism, their enlightenment and even their futuristic interrelations in the given historical period" (326). The fact is, because of its intrinsic worth, the novel has faced critical appraisal and has more often than not, been found wanting.

The accomplishments are significant. The historical detail is, as I have been assured by eminent historian, Bridget Brereton, extremely accurate. And the text successfully brings

to life a people and a dimension of a Caribbean history which, were it not for explorations like this, would remain unidimensional figures on pages of tomes available almost exclusively to scholars. Moreover, the panoramic canvas surveys the complex *melée* of peoples, ideologies, languages, social and historical forces which erupted to make Trinidad the unique place that it is. This text ranks then with the ground breaking explorations of the Caribbean peoples of various ethnicities - the unforgettable portraits of Naipaul's Mr. Biswas, Lamming's Boy G's and Rhys' traumatized West Indian white women - portrayals which brought social groups of the Caribbean alive and available to all, and in the process, unveiled mirror images which have taught us to better understand each other and ourselves.

And Belgrave sought to do this in a form that would have mass appeal. She certainly captures the elements of the fairy tale which appeal to the consumer of popular fiction - the vibrant, velvet-skinned mulatto beauty is won by the young son of an English Earl. The series of obstacles to be overcome come not only in the form of a rival, but moreso in the stringent race and class prejudices which militate against the union. Suspense mounts when Elena marries another to give a name to the child, conceived unknown to her lover, during their single sexual encounter. The estranged lover is alerted by a portrait in which Elena, despite her marriage, wears his gift, a pair of macaws which function as their symbol of constancy and enduring love. He returns to Trinidad and assists Elena and her ailing husband in their on-going struggle against the harsh and repressive British regime. The husband dies and Barry claims his prize.

Elena's developmental path is set off by that of the slave girl Tessa who functions as a kind of alter ego to Elena. Tessa's sole desire was to gain permission from her owners to marry and to set up a humble home with her lover in a rented room. The maelstrom of social and racial and gender antipathy envelops her and fate casts her instead as the sacrificial lamb - she is arrested on a trumped up charge as an act of revenge against her lover Fist. Her escape is flouted by her return to the danger zone to seek assistance for her

masters attacked in a slave revolt. The pair of macaws which prefigure a happy ending for Barry and Elena are matched by the corbeaux which haunt this unfortunate couple and eventually overcome Tessa on her death-bed.

*Ti Marie* attempts to portray the resilient, resourceful Caribbean woman with a strong link to her matrilineage as the heroine of the romantic genre - a contradiction in terms, at best. The result is a text which simultaneously valorizes and deconstructs the fairy tale model. The undercutting of the fairy tale paradigm is nowhere more obvious than in the climactic scene in which Elena is tied to the stake above a pyre awaiting, so fairy tale logic would dictate, the dramatic entrance of the blond-haired, blue-eyed knight in shining armour. The pyre itself dramatizes a strange admixture of mythologies in that Belgrave imposes the text of the European witch-hunt onto the Afro-Caribbean reality. Moreover, the complexities of the socio-cultural environment work against the logical dénouement. The true rescuer here is the mother, the inscrutable, spiritually empowered healer, indigenous Arawak woman, Yei who in a role reminiscent of Rhys' Aunt Clara's performance at the burning of Coulibri, draws on her understanding of the ethos of the attackers to win her daughter's freedom. The logic of the romance is subverted. The mother (goddess?) wins the freedom of her child, while Elena's lover armed with his gun (phallic symbol?) hides helplessly in the bushes. The mother appeals to a more effective and less destructive authority than the gun, the power of supernatural beliefs which rule the psyches of the disgruntled slaves.

The climactic incident also bears resemblances to other myths of conquest. The concept of the native paralyzed by the supposed deity of the conquistador was very popular among adventure writers who wrote on the cultural confrontation between the colonizer and colonized. In Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, the European's claim that he can darken the sun (that is, predict an eclipse) proves the white man's deity in the minds of the African natives and ends their massacre of the white interloper. Haggard was drawing from accounts of the confrontation between the Aztecs and Spaniards under Cortez and



Pizarro, according to which, superstitious natives became paralyzed before the white man, whom they believed to be the incarnation of the returning Aztec god Quetzalcoatl. Resonances of these myths are sounded in Belgrave's creation. Here rebellious blacks, using medieval witch-hunting methods, are held in check, not by the resourceful magic/science of Shakespeare's Prospero, nor by the fear that the conquistador may be the returned Quetzalcoatl, but by Sycorax's/Christophene's threat of an indigenous magic. Whereas in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* Caliban invokes Sycorax's spells in a futile attempt to defeat Prospero's magic, Belgrave's Sycorax is working for the devitalized Prospero and confusion of intent, content and form abounds.

Contradictory forces also come into play in an earlier scene in which Elena views the Carnival. She would dearly love to interpret the masqueraded *negjardin* and the French creole mulatresse as just being happy and frivolous. As soon as she speaks this naive sentiment, she witnesses white men brutally abusing a black slave. The aggression implicit in the Carnival is clearly manifested and at her interference is transformed into its twin manifestation, sexual aggression, as the men turn on her to attempt gang rape. The knowledge of this violence, entrenched in social interaction and manifested in male female sexuality, freezes her and delays for years her emergence into female adulthood.

Elena's involvement in a premarital sex act is also fraught with contradictions. Here it is the earthy, sensual Caribbean woman and not the reticent Englishman who takes the initiative and speaks the encouraging word, whereas Barry begs to be stopped. However, the ensuing events illustrate the extent to which Belgrave's heroine is caught between conflicting social orders. She initiates the sex act precisely because she is not some delicate and supposedly virginal English lady. She speaks in the name of another stereotype: "Look at this primitive place! I too am as wild, as warm, as real! Wake up! See me as I am! I can stand it!" (199) Nevertheless when her passionate, illicit coupling results in pregnancy, Yei, Elena's Amerindian mother advises her not to marry simply to appear respectable, stating that among her people, Elena's "condition was no disgrace,

that the white man's censures were inhuman, wrong and caused too much suffering" (249). As Yei's soulmate, Elena's intellectual strength, rootedness, defiance of custom and identification with the slave community should have enabled her to choose this option, but she is unable to embrace her mother's "world of simple practicality," and chooses in favour of the façade of social acceptability afforded by a hastily arranged cover-up marriage to an adoring stand-by suitor.

If the novel is perceived as a romantic fairy tale, which is how it has been promoted even by Belgrave herself, it stands to be dismissed as entertaining, but naive, simplistic, flawed because of the contradictory interplay of form and content. She states "I was going to write a fairy tale, a story that, though not attempting to change historical reality, would be an 'as it might have been' or as you like it' story" (*Caribbean Women Writers* 326). Belgrave, who lists among her formative experiences, participation in the Black Power student unrest of the Sir George Williams University in 1969-1970, attempts to chart an escape from the brutishness and cruelty of history, and perhaps even a particular historical moment which became personal experience, through a romanticization of a harsh and oppressive historical period.

Clearly themes, social framework and characterization of the novel are far too complex to be explored through such a simplistic genre. Can this failure to fulfil the generic contract be summarily dismissed as artistic limitation? Not quite. Belgrave is a highly conscious, sophisticated artiste who plays with the resonances of the genre too subtly to have repeatedly broken the author-reader contract unwittingly. Within the text she encodes her perception of the elusive nature of the romance. Elena is separated from the fairy tale world by a window pane:

She leaned her forehead on the windowpane, feeling the cool of the glass against her skin, and watched distractedly as her breath caused a slow fog to appear, blurring her view of the outside. With her index finger she idly drew a pattern in the misty glass. Through that one clear spot she saw a lonely soldier, like a fairy-

tale hero, come riding up. He looked so unreal. Lost in her own melancholy world, she simply stared lazily, enchanted by the picture-book quality of the image. Then quickly snapping out of her stupor, she wiped the glass clean and realised that Andre had come calling. [190].

And she constantly moves between a shimmering, "golden" world that has been touched by a magical wand and devastating and debilitating social realities: "She felt herself transported out of the normal pale of existence, to some mystical time and place where all problems disappeared and all prayers were answered" (198).

The picture book world may be enchanting, but ultimately it cannot be sustained. And while the fiction is about romance it is also about the intrusion of grim reality; about the base inhumanity which can underlie interactions of man within his collective groupings - the family, the community, the ethnos, the nation - and the hypocrisies with which such interactions are veiled; it is about the steady encroachment of disillusionment and impotence upon an intelligent and patriotic young girl; it is about the entrenchment of an unjust social and political order within an Edenic geographic and psychic space. Above all, it is about defining the limits of the romantic trope, within a romance which deconstructs itself.

Belgrave claims that the romance element was liberating, lending an "enhanced quality...engaging the emotions of the reader" the result being the capacity "to stir people's emotions - romantically, ideologically, idealistically and patriotically." She also argues that idealized reality serves to project positive images of the island of Trinidad and to counteract "too much promotion of negativity in the world and an insufficiency of examples of goodness, niceness, decency". (Letter from Belgrave to Morgan, June 30, 1995)

The fact remains that while one must acknowledge the effectiveness of the romance paradigm for capturing popular readership, for the careful, critical reader, the marriage between the political, ideological elements and the romantic, fairy tale elements remains uneasy. Perhaps the admonition of the fiery French Republican Louis Sauvage to Elena best encapsulates the ideal state which Belgrave seeks to create: "Realistic yes, but in losing your innocence, don't reject all idealism. Without it one can become bitter and cynical" (195). While I wonder at the potential of *Ti Marie* had it been conceived free of generic constraints, it nevertheless, in far greater measure than the *Caribbean Caresses*, answers the call for a popular novel which would convey a sense of empowerment to the Caribbean people.

## WORKS CITED

- Ali, Lynn-Anne. *Hand in Hand*. Britain: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1993.
- Barron, W.R.J. *English and Medieval Romance*. London and New York: Longman 1987.
- Belgrave, Valerie. "On Combining Batik Art and Novel Writing." *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*. Ed. Selwyn Cudjoe. Wellesley, Massachusetts: Calaloux Publications, 1990. 317-324.
- . "Thoughts on the Choice of Theme and Approach in Writing Ti Marie." *Caribbean Women Writers*. Ed. Cudjoe. 325-328.
- . *Sun Valley Romance*. Britain: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1993.
- Bronte, Charlotte. 1847. *Jane Eyre*. New York, London: W.W. Norton, 1987.
- Bronte, Emily. 1847. *Wuthering Heights*. London and Melbourne: Everyman's Library, 1987.
- Charles, Annette. *Love in Hiding*. Britain: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1993.
- Colleton, Lucille. *Merchant of Dreams*. Heinemann Educational Publishers 1993.
- Cudjoe, Selwyn, ed. *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*. Massachusetts: Calaloux Publications, 1990.
- D'Allan, Deidre. *Fantasy of Love*. Britain: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1993.
- Fowler, Roger Ed. *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*. 1973 London: Routledge, 1991.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979.
- Hubbard, Rita C. *Magic and Transformation: Relationships in Popular Romance Novels, 1950 to the 1980s*. In Nachbar and Lause. 476-48
- Hodge, Merle. "Challenges of the Struggle for Sovereignty: Changing the World Versus Writing Stories." *Caribbean Women Writers*. Ed. Cudjoe. 202-208.
- Jensen, Margaret Ann. *Love's Sweet Return: The Harlequin Story*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984.

Jolly, Dorothy. *Heartache and Roses*. Britain: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1993.

Lamming, George. *In the Castle of my Skin*. 1953. London: Lamming Caribbean, 1970.

Nachbar, Jack and Kevin Lause. *Popular Culture An Introductory Text*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press. 1992.

Naipaul, V.S. *A House for Mr. Biswas*. 1961. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.

Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. 1966. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is an expanded version of "Caribbean Romances and the Problem of Form" presented at the seminar series of the Centre for Gender and Development Studies U.W.I. St. Augustine March 22, 1995. This version was presented at the 1996 International Conference for Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars at Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Women, April 24-27, Florida International University.

I am grateful for the input made by Valerie Belgrave into the final form of this paper, as discussed at the seminar at which I originally aired some of these views and through our subsequent exchanges. I am also grateful for the comments of Gordon Rohlehr, Barbara Lalla and Jennifer Rahim who took the time to read the paper and to give me feedback.

<sup>2</sup> Barron argues that it is futile to search for the origins of the genre in the texts to which the name was initially applied. Though the medieval romance was one of many roots of the modern novel, any attempt to define it by its affiliations with that remote and highly rarefied form would be to classify the acorn in terms of the oak....what distinguished romantic fiction across the ages is the characteristic mode in which it presents human experience." Barron:2

<sup>3</sup> The Christian symbol the bride of Christ - the called out ones of the human race as bought by sacrificial blood and longing for marital union with the divine lover is at the heart of the Christian doctrine of redemption. I wonder if this craving for true romance is not a shadowy, deficient and transient manifestation of an eternal spiritual hunger.

---

<sup>4</sup> Heinemann has produced an educational Caribbean writers series and conceivably the lack of financial success of this series may be a contributing factor in its quest for a share of an existing market for category romances.

<sup>5</sup> The pursuit of a romantic Caribbean has been with us practically since the inception of West Indian writing. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul explored that space between the small lonely boy in the doorway of the isolated mud hut and the search for the material of fiction, the stuff of which romances are made. Although Biswas comes close to bridging the gap when he sings out the exotic place names as a bus conductor, the reality crowds him relentlessly.

<sup>6</sup> A prime example is the sobriquet of the famous calypsonian The Mighty Sparrow. After being honoured with an honorary doctorate for his contribution to the popular art form, he has periodically used the title Dr. Bird. Scholars such as Gordon Rohlehr and Carolyn Cooper through research into popular culture, have been bridging the gap between high and low culture particularly in relation to the oral tradition.