

SALISES (THE SIR ARTHUR LEWIS INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STUDIES, The University of the West Indies) 21st Annual Conference 2020

Presenter: Shareed Mohammed

PhD candidate in Literatures in English

Department of Literary, Cultural and Communication Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Education, UWI, St. Augustine Campus.

Title of Research Paper: "The authoritarian paradiso: The preservation of absolute purity and its effect on the nature of citizenship for the impure stranger, foreigner, migrant and refugee."

Abstract

Wilson Harris, the Guyanese/British fictional writer and theorist, claims that the greatest secret fear of the liberal state is to be swamped by foreigners. It is Harris's conviction that in reaction to such hidden fears, the state institutions in democratic countries create policies based on subtle notions of "stereotypical and absolute purity that may affect the nature of citizenship" ("Profiles of Myth and the New World" 205). Harris further claims that these policies are in reality an "authoritarian texture" which is "hidden beneath various legal codes" to "enshrine cultural and economic and racial distinctions between outsiders and insiders, economic migrants and political refugees" ("The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination" 251). However, according to Harris, these rarely exposed legacies surface only when there is "projected violence by the state upon others to preserve stereotypical purities" ("Profiles of Myth and the New World" 205). It is clear in today's world that such policies have placed terrifying pressures upon marginalized and disadvantaged societies. For instance, this sort of sanctified violence projected by the sacrosanct liberal territory is presently reflected in the United States where the stranger, the foreigner, the refugee are all targeted as impure. This paper seeks to answer the following two questions: How intractable are such notoriously invisible and visible barriers between the liberal nation-state and marginalized immigrant groups? Is it possible for any democratic government to penetrate and re-vision the core of those hidden pre-posessions and biases of the authoritarian texture within our 21st century? This essay will be guided by Wilson Harris's theoretical assumptions of the 'authoritarian *paradiso*' and the 'tormented monolith.' The findings of this paper will reveal that the implementation of a mechanical arrangement to ameliorate the division between dominant groups and apparently marginalized societies is a masked and illusory policy. Most significantly, the findings of this research will highlight that a complex breach of partial and obsolescent orders by

liberal states can potentially and genuinely change the age-old travesty of imperial or divine state and repetitive cycles of violence.

Key words: Wilson Harris, liberal state, authoritarian *paradiso*, tormented monolith, state institutions, stereotypical purity, marginalized, projected violence, partial, policy.

I shall attempt in this exploration firstly, to bring into focus Wilson Harris's theoretical assumptions about the liberal state that may usher in a new dialogue about the reality of migrants to democratic societies such as Trinidad and Tobago. Secondly, this research paper will demonstrate that there could be a capacity for genuine alteration of those existing immigration laws in Trinidad and Tobago.

Wilson Harris's articulation of the term 'authoritarian *paradiso*' touches upon the ultimate and incorrigible cemented fears and biases towards migrants by the institutional life of a democratic state. Harris affirms that the authoritarian *paradiso*¹ is an implicit barrier or "authoritarian texture [that] tends to be hidden beneath various legal codes that enshrine cultural and economic and racial distinctions between outsiders and insiders, economic migrants and political refugees" ("The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination" 250). The authoritarian *paradiso* is prime corollary to the exposure of biased migrant laws in many developed and developing countries. Such a notion is reflected in Harris's observation that such implicit laws:

harden into ... projected violence by the state upon others to preserve stereotypical purities. The stranger is targeted, the foreigner is targeted, the refugee is targeted, as impure. Such targets reflect consent [and] the projection of violence, sanctified violence, upon others. At the heart of such perverse consent lies ... a conviction that we have cemented subconsciously or unconsciously into our prized institutions, the conviction of stereotypical and absolute purity that may affect the nature of citizenship in some nation-states. The tragedy is that all of us- whatever our intellectual and surface persuasion, liberal, democratic, fascist are influenced at some level in ourselves by the charisma of our institutions, the sacrosanct territory of our institutions.

("Profiles of Myth and New World" 205).

¹ Wilson Harris coins the term authoritarian *paradiso* ('heaven or paradise') from Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* which was written in 1320. In this literary text, the character Virgil was barred from the *paradiso*. The reason for this restriction is that Virgil had come from a pre-Christian age. He had come from the pagan world. He was deemed a pagan. Virgil's exclusion from the *paradiso* raises momentous-however disguised-questions about the prejudices exhibited towards migrants in the modern world.

A notable example of the ‘authoritarian paradiso’ in the Caribbean would be the implicit biased immigration laws in Trinidad and Tobago. At its most shrouded level, Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol to respect the rights of asylum seekers. However, this is just a superficial and illusory commitment to international convention since Trinidad and Tobago does not have a refugee law in its statute books. The country’s archaic and current immigration act is primarily a law enforcement piece of legislation that lacks a humanitarian law-based approach. Most significantly, the ‘authoritarian texture’ of this immigration law is no longer blanketed by carapace codes as refugees in Trinidad and Tobago in 2019 and 2020 with asylum certificates and identification cards from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were deported back to their homeland where they could possibly face persecution.

One cannot but assume from such biased laws that breach international conventions of human rights, that Trinidad and Tobago occupies an ambiguous position in its approach to handling illegal immigration. Trinidad and Tobago’s current immigration policies towards the influx of illegal Venezuelan immigrants makes it an ambiguous or “tormented monolith.” According to Harris, a ‘tormented monolith’ refers to the nation state that experiences a “difficulty in relinquishing a conviction of territorial conscription of moral imperative” and the subsequent “implicit polarizations such order engenders between outsiders and insiders, minority and majority cultures” (“The Schizophrenic Sea” 99). The schizophrenic handling of these migrants by Trinidad and Tobago’s government helps us to begin to perceive the decay of order conditioned by strict migration policies. Above all, that order begins to expose its daylight deeds, made sacred by institutional codes in the injustices that have been inflicted on migrant groups.

The absence of a human rights dimension and refugee policies has aroused citizens to consider modifying this country's partial immigration laws. For instance, the prejudiced nature of Trinidad's immigration law towards African immigrants has been articulated by the Emancipation Committee chairman Khafra Kambon². One may gather that one of his prime assertions is that the current immigration law is vague, obsolete and a mere contrivance. Such a capacity to recognize the sealed and stifled reports of violence and discrimination towards immigrants constitutes a faint fissure or breach in the authoritarian paradiso which may subsequently lead to the first thread of conversion of strict migrancy codes.

The fallacy of an archaic law may be clear perhaps to the impartial mind which wrestles with de facto situations, but there is also a rationale or ideology within such obsolete immigration laws that are committed to a purist nationalist logic³, and this must unwittingly cast a shroud over calls for an end to discrimination of illegal immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago. In part, that shroud represents the preservation of a nation's limited physical space and resources. Such immigration laws are necessary to a country's national interests but they need to come into equation with basic human rights. However, if the authoritarian paradiso within Trinidad's immigration laws remain intact, then any call by an outspoken public to revision such laws becomes blocked and flattened. Subsequently, the future influx of migrants to this country is destined to be locked into a limbo of impurity.

² For a more detailed elaboration of Kambon's views, see Renuka Singh's article.

³ Such purist nationalist logic is reflected in the following statement made by Dr. Keith Rowley, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago towards the influx of illegal immigrants from Venezuela to Trinidad and Tobago: "As a government we have the responsibility to protect the interests of the people of Trinidad and Tobago first and foremost. Whatever we feel about the people of Venezuela and their circumstances, our first and primary responsibility is to protect the interests of the people of Trinidad and Tobago....Initially we allowed our doors to be open. Venezuelans came here could spend 90 days and go back and that's been going on and as things get a little worse, more have come and we kept our doors open. But there comes a time when the volume and the presence of these economic migrants in T&T will threaten the quality of life of the people of T&T and it falls to us to protect ourselves from that." (LOOP)

The possibility that Trinidad's rigid immigration laws will not be altered brings into play the following crucial question: Is it possible for any democratic government to penetrate and revision the authoritarian texture of its immigration law within our 21st century? A capacity to divest the seal of the authoritarian paradiso could be reality. However, this may prove to be a difficult task since the fears and biases of the liberal state towards the stranger, the foreigner and the refugee are deeply enshrined within its immigration policies.

Perhaps, in the future democratic state, there could be an arrival at a juncture where a complex modification in its archaic immigration laws will be visualized and implemented. However, a conversion of such laws needs to be formulated to protect both the rights of citizens and migrants. The result may not only represent a fissure in the hubris of the authoritarian paradiso but also the creation of that cross-cultural space where "gifts" from "one culture" are "unselfconsciously" offered to "another culture" (Harris, "Creoleness: The Crossroads of a Civilization" 242). These 'gifts', it is hoped will prove helpful in bridging the particularly complex relationship between a country's preservation of its national interests with the apparently absent laws that should protect the basic rights of migrants.

Works Cited

Bundy, Andrew. ed. *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*.

London: Routledge, 1999. Print.

Harris, Wilson. "Creoleness: The Crossroads of a Civilization?" Bundy 237-247

---. "Profiles of Myth and the New World." Bundy 210-211

---. "The Schizophrenic Sea." Bundy 99-108

LOOP NEWS." PM: T&T can only provide "limited help" to Venezuelans." May 23 2019.

<<https://www.looptt.com/content/pm-tt-can-only-provide-limited-help-venezuelans>>

Singh, Renuka. "Kambon: Horrors for Migrants from Africa." August 19 2020.

<<https://www.guardian.co.tt/article>>