

ABSTRACT

The dissertation undertakes a reading of gender in selected novels written by Samuel Selvon and George Lamming during the 1950's to 1970's. I argue that the fictions deliberately address gender, but this was occluded by the ways of reading used by the West Indian academy up to the 1970's. The occlusion resulted, firstly, from the academy's positioning within the socio-political context of West Indian nationalism, and, secondly, from its paradoxical inurement in the 'apolitical' literary epistemology of the New Critical tradition. Continued acceptance of the 'canonized' ways of reading approved for these fictions has meant that their representation of gender remains largely unread. The present reading is therefore considered revisionary.

The rationale for the study includes reference to the need to balance the reading of gender in contemporary fictions with a similar focus on the older fictions, which anchor the West Indian literary canon. It also refers to current problematics of the West Indian gender situation, which has been described in terms of crisis. I use a multidisciplinary approach and an eclectic literary theoretical base to examine the fictions and the social setting in which they were produced. This setting is described as including the cultural legacy from slavery and the post-Emancipation period. I examine ideology, discourse and representational practices, but also wider aspects of social behaviour in everyday lived experience.

The study concludes that the West Indian gender scenario is a highly complex, transgressive and paradoxical one, which requires theorization. Arguing that traditional binaries are inadequate to describe West Indian gender possibilities, I propose the concept/trope of hermaphroditic gender as an alternative description. This is distinguished from the concept of androgyny, as it accommodates factors not accommodated by androgyny. These include liminality, the final inadequacy of gender as a descriptive category, and some ways in which West Indian identity has been represented historically.

Keywords: Selvon; Lamming; Gender; Hermaphrodite; Representation; West Indian Identity.