

Abstract

A framework for the criticism of West Indian literature, based on nationalist aspirations in the actual context of West Indian society, is the aim of this essay. The ideal method is to isolate the literary framework of each island society, to compare them and to extrapolate the commonalities which will constitute a West Indian literary framework. In this essay the framework is developed, theoretically and by application to the fiction of Victor Stafford Reid and some other Jamaican novelists, in the specific context of Jamaican society and Jamaican literature, as experienced by Jamaican readers.

The Jamaican framework is shown to be determined by the local situation of political conflict caused by the hegemony of imperial English culture mediated by English language (and literature) which, because of its institutionalization and literacy, gives the false appearance of a great tradition. In fact, the oral Jamaica Creole culture and language - in which everybody lives in Jamaica - is the great tradition there, although its orality and stigmatization make it seem like a little tradition. This official preemption of native conceptual space has resulted in Jamaican adaptive code-switching and the Jamaican capacity to encode and decode any native linguistic or cultural sign by either of the two semi-ological systems as is advantageous. Further, the situation results in a Jamaican identity crisis whose literary manifestation is an urgent need for epic articulation.

Reid's literary intention - in response to the situation - is to satisfy this need by writing Jamaican epic and he does this successfully by articulating Jamaican verisimilitude using the expressive resources of Jamaican Creole, to the intense satisfaction of the Jamaican reader.

The urgency of the Jamaican's need for epic satisfaction, as well as the novelty of that satisfaction, prevents him from discriminating between such satisfactions. That inability to discriminate satisfactions extends to his moral life and his writers cannot presently create verisimilitude at that level. Until there is significant social change in Jamaica with a resolution of the institutionalized culture conflict, this literary and moral problem will, it seems, be unresolved.