Sex, sugar and slavery: David Dabydeen's *Slave Song* and the colonial experience

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Abstract: Sugarcane plantation began in the Caribbean from the early 16th century, with the arrival of Portuguese colonizers led by Christopher Columbus who planted seed canes in Santo Domingo in 1493. With demand for sugar increasing in Europe throughout the century, sugar plantations and sugar mills were set up throughout the region. Work in the sugarcane fields was cruel and energy-sapping, and hardly any European opted for such backbreaking work. As a result, a huge number of indentured labourers had to be imported from Africa and East India. These labourers were treated as slaves and were routinely brutalized and controlled by deadly force. The history of their subjugation and control had the body at its core, since the colonizers found it easy to establish their mastery through control and defilement of the slave's body. The torture and mutilation incapacitated the slaves from performing gender roles. But the 'ungendered' slaves also reverted to their biological and sexual selves and employed the power of the body and sex to mount resistance against the colonizers. The resultant violence added a further dimension to the history of colonial resistance. David Dabydeen, a Guyanese poet, picks up this volatile history of colonial sugarcane plantation in his Slave Songs, with particular emphasis on the "erotic-sadomasochistic nature of slavery and plantation life." The fourteen poems written in Creole probe the interconnectedness of sexuality, sugarcane and the body, and trace the history of both colonial subjugation and resistance.

David Dabydeen's *Slave Song*, a slim book of fourteen poems in a rough-hewn Creole was published in 1984, and immediately launched him into fame, earning the prestigious Commonwealth Poetry Prize and the Quiller-Couch Prize. *Slave Song* is Dabydeen's only collection entirely given to poems in Creole – a language he considered "broken," and "naturally tragic." Perhaps in consideration of its alienness to the English ear, Dabydeen provides standard English translations along with fairly detailed commentaries on all but one poem preceding each translation. Most of these poems were written six years prior to their publication, when Dabydeen, an Indo-Guyanese himself, was involved in an intense reexamination of the colonial past of Guyana, particularly its brutal history of slavery, the "deforestation and ecocide" (Dabydeen 2000: 1) of Guyanese countryside as a prelude to sugarcane cultivation, and the uneasy and often violent racial landscape consisting of white plantation owners, African slaves and indentured East Indian labourers. *Slave Song* picks up all of these concerns as its themes, but also explores the provocative and problematic relationship between Black and White, master and slave, man and woman in a colonial setting. It also focuses on the ambiguous position of a poet who, like the urbanized and well travelled young man of the poem "Two Cultures," is steeped in BBC culture and finds his eloquence an ironic contrast to the crude energy of the Creole speaking canecutters and village women. The poems also narrate the backbreaking chores of the "plantation slaves" and their continual debasement and dehumanization.

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The term "plantation slaves" evokes a bitter legacy of slavery and forced labour that supplied the much-coveted items in Atlantic trade: sugar, coffee, tobacco, cotton and cacao. In a wide swath of colonized land, these products were grown by African and East Indian slaves who were tortured and mutilated and were forced to conform to the rigid discipline of plantation economy. Sugar, in particular, had been a lucrative cash earner, and sugarcane cultivation began after Christopher Columbus planted seed canes in Santo Domingo in 1493. Soon after, sugarcane cultivation spread to Cuba, Jamaica and Puerto Rico. The Portuguese took it to Brazil by 1526. And by 1540, there were more than 800 sugar mills in Santa Catalina Island, and another 2000 in the north coast of Brazil. The Dutch brought sugarcane to the Caribbean after 1625 where it was grown in most islands, and subsequently in Guyana.

Sugar planting and harvesting was (and still is) a backbreaking work; it was very much labour-intensive and needed strict discipline and long hours of work in hot and stifling conditions. If sugarcane cultivation was a tiring and dangerous work, the processing part –which produces sugar, molasses etc—was no less so. From the very beginning, hardly if any Europeans were available for work at the sugar plantations and entrepreneurs had to depend on imported indentured labourers from Africa and India who had to work day and night in field and factory. Between 1518 and 1870, these labourers, who were treated as slaves, were brought in such numbers that they became the largest part of the population of the Caribbean. By the time slave trade ended, about 4.7 African slaves were shipped to the Americas, of which about 17% were given employment in the British Caribbean. Although the white population was, in numerical terms, a minority, they maintained their superior position as administrators, traders, managers and financiers.

As long as the slave system continued and plantation economy thrived, slaves were routinely exploited and brutalized. They were controlled by the use of deadly force. Their bodies were considered unclean, disgusting and abject. Deprived economically, socially, sexually and psychologically, the slaves sometimes vented their anger through violence, which meant further repression and punishment. Most found relief in alcohol and sex. Rum is what the slaves produced, and it also destroyed them. The body thus became a site of colonial control as well as resistance. Stories and poems that tell of the slaves' desire for freedom and identity also highlight the need to understand the power of the body. Much like Shakespeare's Caliban imagining his counter-colonial control of the master in terms of corporeal and sexual domination, the slaves also imagine their bodies as a source of power and control--not only over the master, but also over land and geography.

The volatile history of subjugation and control of the Black (for Dabydeen the category includes both Africans and East Indians) by White planters has the body at its core for, it is only through the defilement and degendering of the body that total colonial control is possible. The degendering is the result of torture and mutilation that incapacitate the slave from performing gender roles. A man ceases to be a man when hard labour coupled with addiction to rum destroys his capacity to play any socially responsible male role. A woman too is broken by inhuman labour and ceases to feel like a daughter or mother. Grace Nichols, a Guyanese poet and a contemporary of Dabydeen, in her poem "Ala" paints the picture of a resistant and ungendered slave woman who kills her new born child as a ritual of defiance to enslavement.

> . . . the rebel woman
> who with a pin
> stick the soft mould
> of her own child's hand
> sending the little-new-born
> soul winging its way back
> to Africa – free –
> ("i is a long memorial woman")

The slaves, being ungendered revert to their biological, sexual selves, and employ the power of the body and the liberating effect of sex to energize them, fantasize about erotic encounters with white men and women and inscribe their resistance in the colonial topology. The colonial project of creating "docile bodies" is thus thwarted by the slaves in their act of resistance, which in *Slave Song* takes the form of imagined counter-violence against white men and women, particularly women, who are not only raped, mutilated and left to rot in the sun, but are also made to desire rape by black servants – all of course, in the realm of fantasy. "The poems in this volume (a jumble of fact and myth, past and present)," writes Dabydeen in the Introduction to *Slave Song*, "are largely concerned with an exploration of the erotic energies of the colonial experience, ranging from a corrosive to a lyrical sexuality. Even the appetite for sadistic sexual possession is life giving, the strange, vivid fruit of racial conquest and racial hatred" (Dabydeen 1984: 10). In the poem "Love Song," a canecutter fantasizes about a white woman, but is aware of his disgusting existence and is angered by the work he has to do everyday, all day long. At the end, he is driven to despair and self-pity, and in a moment of rum-soaked melancholy desires the white woman to come to him

> When my soul's soft and my eyes wet/ And the breeze blows and my eyes shut/ And the bottle has no more rum/ then come/ And take me away, where/ there's no chain/ there's no cane/ Come with milk in your breast and your white throat bare . . . .

The poem pretty much summarizes the textual and historical concerns of *Slave Song*: sex, sugar and slavery, more precisely the "erotic – sadomasochistic nature of slavery and plantation life" (Dabydeen, 1984:10).

The erotic evocation of the white woman by the black canecutter in "Love Song" and other poems in *Slave Song* has echoes of Caliban's desire for Miranda and his lament for the lost opportunities to possess her. If Dabydeen's own interpretation of such erotic fantasy is given due credit, then the black slave's love song has more resonances than meet the ear. The fantasy, he says, is "describable in terms of inspiration, aspiration, assimilation into a superior scheme of things" (Dabydeen 1984: 10). It is, in other words, the colonized Other's wish to assume the privileged place of the self and to reverse his inferior and abject position and assume the power to control his own destiny. The colonial and postcolonial ambience of *The Tempest* and more particularly, Caliban's self-projection, have provided a referential framework for a section of Caribbean literature dealing with the colonial history of the region. *Slave Song* also draws on Caliban's ability "to mimic all the parts in the colonial repertory" for its subject construction (Thieme 257). In a talk given at the Royal Festival Hall in London on 8 November 2000 (and broadcast on BBC Radio 3 three days later) on Samaroo's *Tempus Est*, a colonial rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1929), Dabydeen compares Caliban with "the field Negro, the cane cutter, the eternal labourer, dispossessed of island and of native culture." Ariel, to Dabydeen, "symbolizes the mulatto or house-Negro, the new breed of West Indian given a degree of authority and policing over his fellow black in the imperial system of divide and rule . . ." while Miranda is "the European virgin who has to be protected against heathen invasion, against native lust. She is the site of struggle between the colonizer and the colonized" (Dabydeen, 2000: 15). In Samaroo's *Tempus Est*, the Amazonian rainforest is named Miranda, which Prospero, who is a strangely ungendered character and is neither White nor Black, violates. "Caliban's sole instinct and craving," writes Dabydeen, "is to mate with Miranda and to cannibalise Prosperous, a wondrous instance of the eco-oedipal, the greening of sexual psychology" (Dabydeen, 2000: 17).

Dabydeen's own poems assume a wider significance in the context of the "greening of sexual psychology," which appears to be a form of colonial resistance against debasement of the body. The body as a site of colonial control has a long history, and along with it, the despoliation of geography. John Donne, writing at a time when the Empire was just beginning to expand beyond the seas, describes woman's body, in quite a number of his poems, in terms of displacement, otherness, alienation, possession and colonization. In Elegy 19, "Going to bed" the poet contemplates a woman disrobing before going to bed, and his contemplation leads to a replacement of her body "by a kind of 'female landscape.' Thus becoming a microcosmic conception of the world of America or, more precisely, Virginia, a supposedly 'virgin' land" (Docherty, 79).

> O my America! My new-found-land,
> My Kingdome, safeliest when with one man man'd,
> My Myne of precious stones, My Empire,
> How blest am I'm this discovering thee!

At the centre of the volatile history of the conquest and despoliation of the Caribbean landscape lies this owning and "manning" of geography and turning it into a female space inscribed with power and primacy for man. Cultural geographers have focused on how bodies "are performed, resisted, disciplined and oppressed not simply in but *through* space" (Longhurst, 93). The othering of the body, they maintain, proceeds from the practice of privileging minds over bodies.

Slave Song extensively deploys the trope of the body to show how through torture, mutilation and rape, different power relations inscribe themselves on it. On the one hand, there is the colonial authority – represented by the master of the plantation, the white man, and his white wife – who routinely brutalize and exploit the black men and women; and on the other, the uneasy race relations between the blacks and Indians which, from time to time, explodes and unleashes unspeakable violence on people of both races. In times of racial violence, power relation shifts its axis in favour of the side that has numerical and strategic strength. The torture and violence have the unmistakable stamp of male authority: women – whether in the hands of white master or black men – are always the victims, and rape and mutilation are their usual fate. When black men violate an Indian woman, they forget their subaltern position in the colonial frame and assume absolute mastery over the woman. Their assumption of colonizing power is both a psychological assertion of their momentary freedom from the colonial paradigm – a switching of the positions of master and slave in the ineradicable colonial binary – and a mimicry that brings home the sheer barbarity of any colonial hierarchical relation. In the poem "Mala" which quite poignantly recounts the rape and killing of a young Indian girl in Wismar on the edge of Demerera River in a particularly savage attack on the numerically weaker Indian community, Dabydeen describes "the collective violence and the collective realization of sexual fantasy on a frightening scale" (Dabydeen, 1984: 46): "Yesterday they pulled out a young girl from the river, tangled/ Up in the nets among the fish, bloated, breasts bitten/ All over, teeth marks in her throat and thigh./ It wasn't piranha." The dead girl, whose name is Mala, is described in moving details as someone who is both a human being and a sign of endless brutality in a system created, perpetrated and preserved by greed. Lust for land and lust for profit easily translate into lust for body; and the chain of lust leads to lust for blood even of someone who shares the same space and same disprivileged position as the avengers. Dabydeen uses unsettling but sensuous details and erotically charged pictures to mute the elegiac strain of the poem and to bring into a sharp focus the violent nature of Guyanese existence. In *Guyana Pastoral* which is an ironic anti-pastoral of rape and murder of a young girl, Dabydeen again employs the same strategy to bring home the violence inherent in the community; but in this poem he adds another familiar device to the same end, that is, the violence inherent in Guyanese Creole, and its "hard, brutal rhythms" (Dabydeen, 1984: 49).

Slave Song is obsessed with torture, sexuality and sugarcane; to the extent that white women seem to secretly desire to be raped. "The Canecutter's Song," for example, is quite explicit about a white woman wanting "to be degraded secretly . . . to be possessed and mutilated in the mud" (Dabydeen, 1984: 53). The canecutter's song is both an individual and collective fantasy about possession of a white female body, and a regret for his inability to ever achieve "the sort of beauty, cleanliness and inner spiritual strength that are symbolized by the White Woman" (Dabydeen, 1984:53). A comparison with Caliban's desire for Miranda is unavoidable here, and quite fruitful too. While it is quite commonplace to consider the black Caliban to desire the white body of Miranda, it is not so commonplace to consider Miranda ever desiring herself to be possessed by Caliban. But a close reading of the exchange between Miranda and Caliban, particularly the spiteful passage in Act I Scene II where Miranda curses Caliban, reveals that such a possibility is not beyond the narrative frame of the play. As Dabydeen explains in his lecture on Samaroo, "Miranda's savage outburst . . . quite rightly struck critics as not quite in keeping with the fragrance of her character, but sounding more like the cursing of a cheated and revengeful harlot. So for two hundred and fifty years editors gave Prospero the violent speech to preserve Miranda's linguistic virginity" (Dabydeen 2000: 11). The speech also points at Franz Fanon's contention that colonization doesn't only contaminate the colonized, but the colonizer as well. Miranda and Caliban inhabit a space which has already been violated, mutilated and possessed. They, like the white masters and black men in *Slave Song*, are already both contaminated. If Caliban could ever lay his hands on Ariel, he would have done the same violence on him as he would have done on Miranda if Stephano and Trinculo's drunken plot had ever materialized.

Slave Song's graphic presentation of the degraded body, and the frequent references to dismembered body parts, waste, stench and other aspects of abjection can be considered in terms of the newly emerged postcolonial corporal politics. The tortured body with suggestions of the grotesque more than the tragic subverts the idealized body and aspects of formal beauty that Western literary and artistic traditions have so earnestly admired. The focus on the abject challenges the metaphor of purification. Craig Houser suggests that "abject identifications are effective in disrupting 'normativeness'" (Houser 99) in creating a space for (re)claiming power. The link between abjection and power is spelt out in terms of retrieval and recuperation of identity, history and biological power of the body. "The idealized version of the subject entirely free from its allegedly ignoble other – the base materialism of the body –" writes Martin Jay "has been successfully exploded by the new attention paid to abjection" (Jay 156). Abjection, for Dabydeen, is also a liberating antidote to repression, torture and violence. Much like Julia Kristeva, Dabydeen also emphasizes the seductive power of abjection, its distortion of the patriarchal gaze, and eventually, its ability to overturn categorical identities, such as White Woman, Black Man. Dabydeen maintains that "(t)he deepest mood of postcolonial writing . . . is not righteous and retaliatory anger but a song of redemption" (Dabydeen 2000:17). Apart from the history of postcolonial social, political and cultural transformations and the distance between the colonial past and the postcolonial reality of most once-colonized nations, one reason why "retaliatory anger" is subsumed by "a song of redemption" is, perhaps, the body's power to regenerate and reclaim its lost identity. Abjection focuses on the absences within this identity: the disfigurement and mutilation, the "prosthetic grotesque" of Francis Bacon, for example, points to a space of completeness and wholeness, and a loss and denial. Such imaginary reconstruction of body parts and features, in the end, suggests a poignant redemption of the body. Julia Kristeva defines abjection "in terms of mourning for an impossible, always, already lost object" (Jay, 152), which also closely reassembles what Dabydeen describes as a song of redemption. Abjection, seen in terms as impurity, mutilation, and absence, constantly questions colonialism's myth of purity, plentitude and presence. The central image in the lines "I am thirsty, dust and vinegar choke my mouth, sweat leaks over me like gutter-water/ Heat hatches lice in my hair" ("Song of the Creole Gang Women") or "And of how I hold you down, shake up your waist/ Draw blood from your womb, daub it over your face/ Till you're dirty like me . . ." ("The Canecutter's Song") is shocking and repulsive; but readers do not gloss over the picture in search of more reassuring imagery. The violent image forces the reader to linger, and probably look for gaps in the narrative that speak of a "before" or "after." What was the white woman like before the canecutter violated her, even in his fancy? What happens to the Creole Gang Women, tomorrow, day after? These are uneasy questions and bring the opposing ends of a colonial spectrum – White-Black -- together, for an examination of power, violence and sado- masochism.

Two other aspects of *Slave Song* remain to be examined for the way it reconstructs postcolonial textuality – its language and its narrative mode, and the translations and notes. The notes, which Dabydeen describes as "playful," are parodic of the tradition of TS Eliot and Alexander Pope, who also provided annotations to their poems. But critics also believe that the notes have a "peculiarly postcolonial effect and meaning" (Martin 93). Mark McWatt, for example, sees the notes as an attempt to control the Creole voice by a translator who represents the colonial culture (McWatt 62). There is no doubt that the notes have the appearance of spoofs – their facile summarizing of events and description of unspeakable horror, violence, pain or remorse at times appears grotesque; but the notes also perform the important role of filling up the reader's knowledge gap. There is nothing wrong in assuming that many English readers (Why only English? Why not those across the globe?) may have difficulty making full textural and contextual meanings of the poems, and the notes may be of help. However, Dabydeen seems to be fully aware of his duality, his "inbetweenness," his inhabiting the space between two cultures, and the problem of talking across both. The notes and translations remind the readers of the essential hybridity underlying the postcolonial situation anywhere – of forever belonging and not belonging to two or more cultures – and making light of the irreversible situation.

And finally, Dabydeen's Creole and the use of Standard English for notes and translations. Despite the fact that he underrates Creole as inadequate to express a wide range of feelings, the impression the poems give is quite the opposite. His Creole is forceful, intense and driven by the kind of energy that characterizes the resistant language of the colonized anywhere, such as in the cursing and swearing speeches of Caliban in *The Tempest*. Creole is primarily an oral language, and

Dabydeen writes about its "kinetic energy" in the Introduction to *Slave Song*. The poems retain the oral qualities of the language: sharp articulation, rough texture of words, alliteration, suggested bodily gestures accompanying oral presentation and the raw energy of a living discourse – what Dabydeen described sometimes as "vulgarity," sometimes as "brutality." His translations read less charged and animated in comparison, and Dabydeen himself admits that at places, "(t)he English fails where the Creole succeeds" (Dabydeen 1984: 14). His poems, in spite of their harshness, are lyrical, and faithfully reflect the experiences of the marginalized and the colonized. The language itself cannot be tragic, as Dabydeen suggests, but the experiences of the users certainly are. These experiences, ranging from bitterly nostalgic to frighteningly violent reflect the colonial suppression of the subject and his desire for freedom and revenge. The freedom never comes though, and revenge turns inwards, into acts of fantasy, or brutality against fellow subalterns. *Slave Song* thus shows both the continuity of colonization in its different mutations across geography and culture; and the continuous history of subjugation and resistance, and different ways it manifests itself.

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