

“Cane is Bitter”: The “Epigraph” of Caribbean History

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Abstract

Cane-cultivation can, to a large extent, be said to symbolize the history of the Caribbean. Following Columbus’s discovery of gold in the West Indies and his later realization that the gold supply from the area was finite, his attention turned to the large-scale cultivation of cane which was then a highly lucrative crop. The cultivation of cane was highly capital-and-labour-intensive. The more sophisticated and efficient machines for extracting sugar were expensive and the crop itself was highly perishable which meant that it had to be processed shortly after harvesting. Negro slavery provided easily available and replaceable, unskilled labour. Under slavery, the humanity of the blacks was almost completely eroded. This inhumane system of slavery, coupled with the cultural and racial plurality found in the West Indies had far-reaching influences on the Caribbean psyche, such as are difficult to eradicate even in the twenty-first century. And so, the objective of this paper is to show how cane is bitter as depicted in literary texts by Caribbean writers and why it could be regarded as the “epigraph” of Caribbean history. The methodology of the work is to first examine a selection of published literary works on the subject and then have recourse to relevant critical materials in a bid to enhancing the focus of the arguments. In the end, it is found out that cane, indeed, is bitter because it was what brought about the uprootment and dispossession of millions of people from thousands of miles of ocean for servitude in the West Indies and also destined them to a life of hard toil, dependence, ignorance, illiteracy, poverty, disease and subservience.

Keywords: cane, cultivation, epigraph, Caribbean, history, bitter,

1. Introduction

Cane-cultivation is central to the history of the Caribbean which begins abruptly with the “discovery” of the Bahamas in 1492 by Christopher Columbus. Initially, Columbus thought that there was an inexhaustible supply of gold to be obtained from the West Indies. But later, it was found out that the gold supply from the area was finite and the colonizer’s attention turned to the commercial cultivation of cane which was then of high economic value in the world market.

The cultivation of cane was arduous and expensive. The more sophisticated and efficient machines for extracting sugar were expensive and the crop itself was highly perishable, which meant that it had to be processed shortly after harvesting. Also, the planting and harvesting of cane required considerable labour and the manufacturing process was tedious. The production of sugar on an economic basis, therefore, required a considerable initial financial outlay and a large cheap labour force. Negro slavery provided easily available and replaceable unskilled labour.

Under slavery, the humanity of the blacks was progressively eroded, especially, with the arduous work hours, stringent penalties for absenteeism and the promulgation of slave codes which gave legal sanction to slavery. These codes deprived slaves of the freedom of movement or the simplest exercise of their freewill. For instance, they could not marry without their masters’ permission, could not own property, were considered to be moveable property and could be punished even unto death by their masters.

This brutally indifferent method of slavery, coupled with the racial and cultural diversity found in the West Indies and the uprootment and dispossession experienced by the African slaves helped to rob the negroes of a sense of historical continuity and emphasized the lack of control over their lives. It also gave rise to such psychological traumas as alienation, rootlessness, inferiority complex and the colonial mentality.

However, with the abolition of slavery and the vacuum created in the labour force, many Indians migrated to the West Indies as indentured labourers. This introduced new racial, linguistic and cultural complications into the already diversified West Indian society. The cultivation of cane was therefore, the basic reason for the institution of slavery and had important influences on the Caribbean psyche, such as the engendering and nurturing of inter-

colonial rivalry and the isolationist outlook, and an endemic and crippling sense of provincialism, all of which are difficult to eradicate from the twenty-first century Caribbean mentality.

And so, cane is bitter because it was what caused the uprootment of millions of people – black and Indian – alike from thousands of miles of ocean for servitude in the West Indies, and long after slavery was abolished, their fortunes remained tied to the whims and caprices of the white men who ran the sugar estates on which they worked. Cane is bitter because it has destined them to a life of hard toil, poverty, ignorance, illiteracy, subservience and dependence. This phenomenon which is depicted in many Caribbean literary texts is, therefore, the subject of study in this paper.

2. Methodology

As already indicated, the work, being a literary research is mainly library-based. First, a selection of published literary works by Caribbean writers on the subject has been rigorously examined and then such critical references as Journal articles, reviews, critiques, interviews, and books (including historical works) have been consulted to shed more light on the subject.

3. “Cane is Bitter”: Its Depiction in Literary Texts

In his poem entitled, “Homestead” (1967), E. W. Roach bemoans:

The man is dead but I recall
Him in my voluntary song
His life was unadorned as bread
He reckoned weathers in his head
And wore their ages on his face....
And every furrow of the earth
And every wind-blown blade of grass
Knows him the spirit of the place....
We were enslaved in the ancestral cane
We're trapped in our inheritance of lust,
The brown boot scorns the black.... (22 – 23).

The above lines not only allude to the hard toil and bitter servitude associated with cane, but also laments the tragic fate of the cane labourer, who, after slaving himself out without commensurate remuneration is often abandoned to die, which is why the poet asks:

Is labour lovely for a man
That drags him daily into earth
Returns no fragrance of him forth.... (23).

In *The Plains of Caroni* (1970), and the symbolically titled short story, “Cane is Bitter” (1979), the harshness of cane is, again, in focus. But, cane, apart from emphasizing the dependent status of the peasants, also diminishes them physically. In the short story, we learn that Ramlal used to be handsome but that “work in the fields had not only tanned his skin to a deep brown but actually changed his features” (60). Similarly, Rookmin used to be strong and could not be considered ugly but “hard work... had taken a toll. Her hands were wrinkled and callous. The toes of her feet were spread from walking without any footwear whatsoever” (60 – 61).

The limiting influence of cane is also seen in the peasants’ total dependence on the crop. These are people who have never left the village nor known any other way of life than that in the cane fields which makes them not only myopic and fearful of progress and change but also reactionary. For instance, the old man in *The Plains of Caroni* is vehemently opposed to the introduction of a combine harvesting machine into the plantation village where he works. To him, this will not only make the rich richer, but will further impoverish the peasants. He, therefore, takes his avenging sugar cane cutlass and destroys the harvester.

Cane is also the title of Jean Toomer’s novel –*Cane* - and its destructive potential is evident in the material poverty and almost hopeless lives of the characters – most of whom are blacks – that we find in the novel. Cane is the metaphor that explains the characters’ presence in America: Karintha, Dan moore, Carrie K., Barlo, Carma, Fern, Esther, Rhobert and Avey are all descendants of black slaves and inhabit the Southland part of America, the second home of most Africans transported as slaves to America. Their near-tragic lives which stems largely from their racial origin is symbolized by cane, hence, the novel’s title, *Cane*.

In “Ruins of a Great House” by Derek Walcott, the exploitation and deprivation associated with cane is also explored. While the white master built no schools, libraries or enduring monuments of their existence in the West Indies, the “great house” depicts the opulence in which they lived with slaves toiling for them. Words such as “disjecta membra”, “dismembered empty shelves”, etc., reflect the aura of decay which now characterizes the great house, while phrases like “the leprosy of an empire” (34) conjure up images of a diseased world which tainted the quality of life of the negroes in the New World. The magnificence of this house was built on the pain and blood of slaves and its beauty was founded on brutality and evil. Walcott shows that there was a lack of visible achievement in this period, which, perhaps, makes Naipaul ask:

How can the history of this West Indian futility be written...?

The history of the Islands can never be satisfactorily told.

Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies (1969, 29).

A Brighter Sun (1979) concerns itself with the issues of creolization, language, identity and national consciousness. But central to these issues are the difficulties which a young labourer from the cane fields - Tiger - encounters in trying to adapt to a new way of life other than that in the cane fields. Briefly summarized, after his marriage, sixteen-year-old Tiger with his child-bride, Urmilla, moves from Chaguanas, a sugar cane belt where his parents live, to Barataria – a sub-urban and more cosmopolitan area of Trinidad – to seek his independence and manhood. For Tiger, this is a journey into uncertainty and also marks the beginning of his quest for independence. However, away from the influence of their parents, Barataria with its independence from the cane industry offers the Tigers the right environment for the establishment of new relationships and for becoming more aware of life’s other options, than that in the cane fields. By the end of the novel, Tiger, having experienced a long and painful process of loss and self-discovery, acquires a well-defined sense of responsibility and is willing to cope with whatever is available in the West Indies. However, he denounces the idea of going back to cane-cultivation for, cane, apart from bringing back bitter memories of exploitation, humiliation and brutality, reminds him of his peasant roots. Therefore, he cannot contemplate ever returning to cane-cultivation as a possible life’s option: “He considered going back to the cane fields in Chaguanas, but the thought of it made him laugh aloud” (215).

But *Turn Again Tiger* (1979), which is a sequel to *A Brighter Sun* makes it immediately clear that Tiger’s root in the cane fields are not that easily laughed away, as Selvon arranges Tiger’s return to the sugar cane estate of Five Rivers, where Babolal, Tiger’s illiterate father needs Tiger’s help to manage an experimental cane project. But Babolal deceives Tiger as to the nature of his job in Five Rivers. He is not to be the overseer of the project but its foreman. This significantly alters Tiger’s expectations of his relationship to Five Rivers.

And so, *Turn Again Tiger* deals with the re-investigation of the cane legacy in the Caribbean. It is for Tiger, a step back into that past which is both their personal history and the history of the Caribbean as well; a step which awakens memories of a way of life that Tiger thought he had left behind. These are memories of defeated manhood, humiliation endured, exploitation suffered, his people victimized and abused because of their indentureship to the cane industry and the hierarchy of the estate village.

Five Rivers stands in direct contrast to sub-urban Barataria and the harshness of cane is reflected in the poverty of the cane workers and in the underdevelopment of the village. Like Crossing of “Cane is Bitter” (1979), Five Rivers is a village which lacks educational facilities and basic amenities such as pipe-borne water, electricity, public transportation, etc.: “Looking down into the valley, the few scattered huts of the village were tiny when Tiger could discover them, for they were built of clay and thatched with palm leaves and blended into the scenery as if they were deliberately camouflaged” (1).

Thus, moving from the semi-cosmopolitan Barataria where he has friends, to the rural and deprived Five Rivers where he initially stands aloof from the villagers who work in cane affords Tiger the opportunity of exploring the legacy of slavery and indentureship and its far-reaching influence on the life of the contemporary West Indian. Tiger’s arrival here marks a return to this past which he uncompromisingly rejects, yet still finds himself tied to by memory and by the need to help his father. He is threatened by its re-emergence. His stay here, therefore,

initiates a period of voluntary indentureship to cane which he bitterly resents and from which he is to be released only after the cane harvest is completed.

And so, Tiger stands on a hill that overlooks the valley of cane that is Five Rivers: “Cane danced and swayed in the wind until the eye collided with a mountain in the distance. He had never seen cane like that, from on top... and he thought: sometime in the future you will be in another country in another form, sweetening an Englishman’s cup of tea in London, perhaps and he won’t be thinking of cane at all”. (1). However, standing on the hill gave him a feeling of power but:

He hated the cane. Cane had been the destiny of his father,
and his father’s father. Cane had brought them all from, the
banks of the Ganges as indentured labourers to toil in the
burning sun. And even when those days were over, most
of them stayed shackled to the estates (1).

Sandra Paquet observes that the hill/valley metaphor symbolizes the distance that has evolved between Tiger and his roots and that Tiger’s descent into the valley, into the cane fields of his past involves a psychic journey into unexplored areas of self-identity and personal history. She notes further that Tiger’s descent from hill to valley is echoed by Makak’s descent in Walcott’s *Dream on Monkey Mountain* from Morne Makak and his incarceration in the valley below, where Makak finally wrestles with, and destroys the white goddess that torments his soul.

Working as time-keeper with his father under a white supervisor, and for a while, as gardener at the white supervisor’s quarters, Tiger is forced to confront and deal with the social and psychic tensions that arise between his origins in a traditional Indian community of cane workers and his emerging ambition as a literate, self-educated member of the Barataria community. He resolves to establish his independence of both these bitter childhood memories and of his father’s “groveling respect for the white man” (49). He bolsters his threatened ego with self-assurances of his difference from the others who work in cane by virtue of his literacy. At this stage, he is detached from the peasants and prefers the job of time-keeper to that of actual cultivation of the crop because, this job imbues him with a false sense of superiority. It is this same feeling of superiority which moves him to fight his father over the occupation of certain rooms in the house.

However, it can be said that the conflict which develops between Tiger and Babolal is not just a struggle between father and son for pride of place, but a conflict between the nature of Babolal’s relationship to cane and Tiger’s rejection of that circumscribed world. Thus, Tiger wages a war against a system that has impoverished and dehumanized the black race. While Babolal represents the traditional order to things, Tiger is the champion of the new breed of West Indians who are determined to “change and dislocate a *status quo* that has done great damage to the black man’s image and human dignity” (Acholonu 1987, 85). Thus, cane to Tiger, symbolizes colonialism with its attendant evils against the black race, while the cane estate represents the battle field of the colonial encounter which resulted in the defeat, subjugation and dehumanization of the black race.

Tiger’s onslaught against the traditional order with all its myths and taboos however, takes a “climactic turn” in his encounter with the white woman, Doreen, the wife of the plantation supervisor. Tiger’s personal convictions and sense of superiority become badly shaken by his inability to successfully confront the temptation posed by Doreen Robinson as he stumbles on her bathing naked in the river. At once, Tiger becomes embarrassed as if he is the naked one and his first reaction is to get away before he is seen – not creep silently but run wildly, as in panic. Robinson’s wife reveals to Tiger that he is still tied to the fears and inhibitions of a debilitating respect for a value system that makes the white woman different from any other woman. Thus, while Tiger manages a certain indifference to the white supervisor, his white wife, Doreen, is quite another matter. As he stumbles on her, Tiger reflects:

There was danger here, his thoughts were jumbled as he tried
to reason it out, flashing across the years to his childhood,
keep off the white man’s land, don’t go near the overseer’s
house, turn your head away if you see the white man’s wife.
Such were the warnings of old men who in their youth had
laboured in the fields and passed their experiences to their own
sons (49).

And so, despite Tiger’s best efforts, he succumbs to the postures he was taught as a child and he runs away from the scene in panic:

Tiger ran. He stumbled around the corner and kept on running,

his bare feet thudding lightly on the trail, the sound deadened by dry leaves. He stepped blindly on a horsewhip snake sunning itself in the path, and it wrapped itself around his foot with the speed of a taut spring suddenly released. Tiger grabbed it and pulled it away and flung it in the bush, still running in a kind of one-legged madness. (50).

After he had run for about half a mile, he slowed down gradually and his pace slackened. As he fell into a walk, his folly became more possessive and he became so full of shame that he stopped dead and stood still in his track, as if his motionlessness could compensate for his flight. With a quick turn of emotion, he turned around and faced the direction from which he had come:

All his mind cried out to go back, to repair this damage to his dignity before it was too late. He actually took a few steps angrily, thoughts flying about in his head confusedly, but of one thing he was sure: he had made a mistake in fleeing. He had run away like a little boy, scared, because a white woman had called out to him. He, Tiger, who had his own house, who had a wife and a child, who worked with the Americans during the war, who drank rum with men and discussed big things like Life and Death, who could read and write. Better if he had cringed, if he had bowed and stooped and blurted out good morning like some ordinary illiterate labourer and asked if there was something he could do. But to run away, to panic as if the devil were at his heels – for that there was no forgiveness. Anybody else would have acted differently – even old Soylo would have gone along the track wrapped in his own ignorant dignity, stepping slowly until he was out of sight. (51).

Tiger, thus, sees Doreen as the symbol of the evils of the cane legacy and he swears: “The bitch... she don’t know that is she who cause everything” (145). Tiger’s shame of his childish flight from Doreen’s nakedness takes on a self-destructive bent. The damage to his self-esteem is more than he can handle and deterioration sets in with drunkenness, the neglect of his wife and child, the rejection of his responsibility as a literate member of the community and the symbolic burning of his books for their failure to help him deal with the crisis of his infatuation with Doreen:

“No more books” he told himself, watching them burn, “they only make me miserable”. Plato, Aristotle, Shakespear, the lot. All them fellars dead and gone, and they aint help me to solve nothing. You study this, you study that, and in the end what happen? In the end you hungry, in the end you wondering if you going to meet Singh in the shop to have a drink, you wondering if Ramroop child would get better from the cough, and if the tomatoes you plant going to bear next week. And before you know it, you come a old man and you dead and everything finish. All of them there, all them bitches, none of them know what happen to you when you dead.... (111 -112).

Tiger, however, assures himself: “If the chance only come, I know what I go do” (245). The golden opportunity comes almost immediately and nature takes its normal course as Tiger finds himself engaged in a carnal battle with Doreen.

It is significant that their sexual encounter when it finally occurs at Doreen’s initiative is meant as an act of violence on Tiger’s part. There is no tenderness, no single gesture of affection that might sentimentalize their passion. This is in part, a reversal of the white man/Indian girl relationship that haunts Tiger’s memories of the sugar cane belt of Chaguanas. The humiliation Tiger feels because of his earlier inability to deal with Doreen’s sexuality purges itself in his determination to kill her:

He held the cutlass tightly and said to himself that he would kill her. When he said that, it gave him courage: his grip tightened and he felt that if he killed her everything would be all right after.

That was why he held her, to kill her. And when she held on too,
Straining against him and caressing the sweat on his skin, he was
entirely unaware of it. He crushed her to him and they fell locked
like wrestlers on dry baboo leaves. (146).

Tiger's imagined sexual violation of Doreen therefore, becomes the ready substitute for his determination to kill her since his hatred is so intricately bound up with his infatuation. In Paquet's words "the phallic image of the black man's cutlass on white flesh neutralizes the anguish of a memory in which it was always the white overseer who took Indian women and not the other way round" (xiii). And so, the indignities of the gardener and white mistress roles are expunged in the crudeness of this sexual encounter which is intended as a mutual assault and cancels out both the idea of an illicit passion and the passion itself. Selvon carefully excludes any suggestion of tenderness or romantic involvement that might mar their encounter as the working out of a deep psychic hurt. In the violence and exhaustion of their mutual passion, Tiger succeeds in killing off that part of him that remained vulnerable to the mystique of the white woman and with it one of the legacies of a colonial past that the hierarchical structure of the sugar cane estate sustains. As Acholonu puts it "the glorious physical combat of pleasure signifies the final destruction of the mysteries of the superiority and power associated with the white man's world" (85).

And so, cane, as can be seen is the dominant image in the novel. It is also the precipitating factor for several actions in the work. For instance, cane is the reason for which Babolal persuades Tiger to move to Five Rivers. It is also cane that defines their relationship to Five Rivers and the quality of life there. For Babolal, cane is his whole life. He organizes the rhythms of his life and gauges its possibilities in terms of cane. In fact, Babolal's body "smelled of work; the wild sweet smell of sugar cane" (4). For him, there is no romance in the work, having lived with it all his life, for out of a cane field, Babolal is helpless and lost.

Cane is also the cause of Soylo's personal distaste, having lost his wife and son to it. Like Tiger, Soylo is overwhelmed by a private grief that cuts him off the rest of the community. He tells Tiger how he lost his only son in the burning of cane before harvest and how, later, his wife went mad with grief and died.

Cane is equally the source of the marital discord between Otto and his wife, Berta, for it is in the cane field that Berta and Singh are discovered together before Otto takes up their challenge and defends himself against their debasement of his love and manhood.

Cane is also the symbol around which the techniques in the novel are built. Through the structural set-up of Five Rivers, Selvon presents a facsimile of a typical sugar estate with the white supervisor and his wife at the top, aloof from everyone else and surrounded by all their creature comforts. Robinson's name suggests a connection with Robinson Crusoe, the literary archetype of the plantation owner, trader in slaves and colonizer.

The process of cane-cultivation is also made to parallel Tiger's development. When Tiger goes to Five Rivers, cane is cultivated. At this point, Tiger and Urmilla are green and full of life. At the end of the novel, cane is harvested and Tiger insists on participating actively in it as opposed to his time-keeper's job. He, like Romesh in "Cane is Bitter" is no longer content to maintain a distance between himself and the peasants.

However, at the end of the stories, both Tiger and Romesh renounce the idea of ever returning to cane-cultivation as a possible life's option. Romesh announces: "I am not going to stay bab... I will help with the crop, you shall get the bonus if I have to work alone in the night. But I am going away after the crop" (72). Similarly, Tiger, planning a return to Baratavia, is looking forward to assuming a community leadership role which he failed to play in Five Rivers largely because of his private war with cane. In fact, Tiger becomes vulnerable to the lure of emigration and the prospect of further education rather than continue to work in cane. This is because, cane, apart from emphasizing their dependent status, diminishes the peasants physically and makes them myopic and fearful of progress and change as can be seen in Ramlal, Babolal and Rookmin. Cane underscores their subservient position in relation to the whites and emphasizes their abject social and economic deprivation and lack of control over their lives, for example, their fortunes, wealth and even mood depend on cane. This is in addition to the fact that cane is also a physically ugly and brutal crop, which perhaps, makes Naipaul declare:

I never liked the sugarcane fields. Flat, treeless and hot,
they stood for everything I had hated about the tropics

and the West Indies.... It is a brutal plant, tall and grass-like, with rough, razor-edged blades I knew it was the basis of the economy but I preferred trees and shades (67).

Tiger's move from Chaguanas to Barataria, to Five Rivers, and then to Barataria again is not unconnected with the disruptive potential of cane and epitomizes the predicament of the nomadic society and individual: a wanderer in space and time, who can find no anchorage. And so, cane is bitter because it brings back bitter memories of exploitation, humiliation and brutality as well as reminds the people of their peasant roots. Cane is bitter and this is seen in the peasants' total dependence on it which not only makes them reactionary, but also renders them with a limited perception of life's possibilities. In fact, Bruce F. Macdonald makes the point that cane prevented the relationship that might have developed between the agricultural labourer and the land because work on the land was associated with cane and cane meant servitude, with the result that the agricultural workers readily turned away from the land to work for the Americans at their new military bases. In his words: "the land was for cane, cane was cruel and few could be intimately associated with land on its terms" (173). And so, Tiger and Romesh seek release from it. As Romesh puts it, there was too much of the "sameness" all over: "cane, labour, boy children and the familiar village...?" (70).

4. Conclusion

From the foregoing, it becomes evident that the epithet, "Cane is Bitter", can, indeed, be said to be the "epigraph" of West Indian history. With the discovery of the great economic potential of sugar in the world market and the consequent importation of negro slaves and indentured Indian labourers into the West Indies, plantation slavery began in the Caribbean. And so, cane is bitter because it was what caused the dispossession and uprootment of millions of people from their homelands for servitude in the West Indies and destined them to a life of hard toil, poverty, ignorance, illiteracy, subservience and dependence. Cane is bitter because it is a killer and destroyer of dreams and hopes as seen in Soylo's case where he lost his son and wife to it. Perhaps, V. S. Naipaul sums it up better when he says: "sugar is an ugly crop and it has an ugly history" (129).

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