

Ladoo, Harold S. — No Pain Like This Body

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by Emile Espinet

Harold Ladoo, a young Trinidadian living in Toronto, has written a novel that can be regarded as another step towards elucidating the rather contorted ethnology of the East Indian in the Caribbean. But no one has treated the theme quite like this before. Of course the East Indian as 'coolie' is by now a familiar figure in Caribbean Fiction, but Ladoo has made a poetically ambitious attempt to go beyond — or rather behind — the dimensions already explored by other novelists. In this connection Samuel Selvon's early novel of East-West Indian ritual and self discovery, "Turn Again Tiger", comes easily to mind as a possible influence, but in certain respects "No Pain . . ." precedes rather than springs from the pathos of Selvon's anti-hero. It must be emphasized that this statement is not in any way a comparison of the literary merits of the two novels. What it does imply is that Ladoo seems to have written on the premise that a philogenetic condition ever more basic than Tiger's, needed to have been exemplified, and as a result a small terrified family is allowed to disintegrate in a welter of primordial rain and mud.

"Carib Island" is a thin disguise, and anyone who is acquainted with the cane and rice regions of Trinidad or Guyana will easily recognize Tola District. Even the map provided on one of the book's foreleaves bear familiar details. The truth is that the village, like the rain and the mud, is archetypal. It could be any of a dozen such communities strung out along a river like the Caroni. Villages, with ironical names like Amity and Relief, that erupted like mould on the bagasse of a savage, colonial crop.

Cane and African slavery: Cane and Indian serfdom.

The cycle of white greed and black exile continued for decades after the blockage of the Middle Passage. Indeed the trade flow was merely diverted. Flying the flags of a different legislation, the ships with their human cargoes left the docks of India instead of the shores of Africa. The islands of limbo were one on their common destinations. In signing the contracts of indentureship few Asians knew exactly where they were heading. Many were led to believe they would be taken merely to another part of Mother India. They were astonished when they found themselves crossing water. And there is a twisted satisfaction hidden somewhere in the fact that, landed in the lost Indies, several refused to recognize that they had, indeed, left India. This attitude forcefully illustrates the aphorism that in the psyche of the exile, India is a racial fixation, not merely a place. Mother India is wherever there is mindless labour and malnutrition, blinding sun over filthy water, lepaved temples for prayer and fields for defecation. In Trinidad, for instance, the treacherous, sluggish Caroni became the holy Ganges, on which defiled banks they were resigned to sweat in life and, hopefully, burn after death. In the Caribbean they realized maybe only a little more food and a lot more labour. Added to

this was the systematic debasement of their religion, and of their women. Caroni Sugar Estate meant largely a process of cultural denigration that culminated in racial shame.

Unlike the Africans, who spontaneously vacated the plantations after emancipation, the vast majority of Indians continued labouring in the sun — often for their same old masters who may have treated them inhumanly — after the termination of their contracts. One reason for this is that, whereas the ex-slave associated the fields with his degradation and loss of identity, and therefore sought to redeem his stolen manhood by removing himself as far as possible from the scenes and symbols of slavery, the Asian acknowledged no such simple redemption. India — the kind of India that was his caste inheritance — was the condition of his soul, and he would take it with him wherever he went. Manumission meant chiefly the right to purchase land of his own when he had saved enough. The little abject settlements of mud and dung and tapia gave rise to firmer, larger villages which in some cases were the nuclei of fairly large permanent towns; all still largely dependent on the cane companies for work and survival. Most village families worked on the estates for money, while kitchen gardens provided staples of ground provision, corn and rice.

One such village is Tola Trace and one such family is Babwah his wife and four children. They plant rice and work on the cane wherever work is available. The events of the novel take place during the rainy season, when all work except in the paddies ceases. Rain is the dominant force of the novel. It falls constantly, seeps into everything. It exists both as an enemy and a catharsis. In the rain the protagonists are delivered through episodes that, like stations of the cross, would bring death to a son and oblivion to his mother. The little children are the innocent witnesses of a primitive religion that is slowly evolving as a crude syncretism of Eastern mysticism and Western pragmatism. They see the rain as a hostile manifestation of an inexplicable God: "The rain didn't care about Tola. Rain was pounding the earth. Ma and Balraj saw the drops; they looked like fat white worms invading the earth from above. God was trying to tie the earth and the sky with the rain drops. The whole of Tola was dark and dismal." And later: "The rain was falling as if God was cleaning out the sky with water and rage. They stood together and prayed, but the rain drops touched their skins as needles, and they felt fear and pain covering them up. It was painful, but they had to move on."

But it can be welcomed as a benediction. The echo of its earth fall is woven into the reassuring tattoo of Nanny's drum, when she arrives on the scene to bring spiritual comfort and practical solace to her daughter's family. In like fashion the rain echoes the multitudinous sounds that perforate the drama.

What is even more arresting is that Ladoo often uses the noises of external phenomena as a device to call attention to the actions of his humans: the "glub glub" of the river at night is an echo of rum flowing down Babwah's throat; when old Nanna has exhausted himself crossing the swollen river his breathing "foo foo foo" is strongly suggestive of the mooing of the hungry cattle. Ladoo wants you to listen. If rain is the dominant phenomenon of the novel then hearing is its vital sense. It is as though what is heard in existence is what is most keenly felt.

In Ladoo's experiments with onomatopoeia, his pinpointing of the simple sharp sounds of everyday function and collapse, and in his ingenuous animal imagery, can be discerned an intention to recreate a world as elemental as Eden. And, as in Eden, one's attention is drawn to certain entities that symbolize the forces of strength and effeminacy, security and evil. They are often protean, changing shapes according to prevailing moods. Ma's coil of black hair is seen either as a black fowl when she is hurt and helpless, or as strands of strong black rope when she has successfully protected her children from the vicious resentment of her husband. Pa' is the perpetual threat. His characteristic personification is the snake, perhaps the most malevolent of all the evils that surround. There are the evils of the water, the snakes; and the evils of the soil, the "skopians"; the evils of the night and the evils of the sky. Into this psychically charged, primitive setting the narrative flows with the simple power of the parable. This power is increased by the essential integrity of the writer's art and craft, and by the accuracy of his dialect. An Indo-Caribbean dialect does exist.

Also there is an effective timelessness about the book. Ladoo has dated his events a rather cryptic 1905. The villagers seem not to know it. They get together to drink and swear and "trow able ledder" at each other with practically no reference to the existence of another kind of people, another way of life. Their only historical sense is contained in their tales of the remorseless copulations, successes and banishments of semi-legendary villagers. Perhaps Ladoo's subtlest triumph is in being able to convince his readers that "No Pain. . ." could easily have been one of those ribald savage-sweet tales told by the neighbours on the night of the wake of scorpion-stung Rama.

This is Ladoo's first novel and, in "No Pain. . ." he has avoided some fine 'first-novel cliches. The most important one he has sidestepped involves the very theme. The trap is that the new writer, because he has been fashioned in a colonial 'unreal' territory where cultural distinctions were ignored or deplored, and thus the foundations upon which an indigenous art can develop, were erased, he must expose the story of his childhood, in all its spiritual naivete and artistic simplicity. Such a story is told in some detail, regardless of how often it has been told before; of how often the predicament has been appreciated and overcome by other writers. But the implication is that the events of the new writer's childhood — or at least his apprehension of these events — were in some way profoundly different; and it is this difference, presumably, that has made the writer. His sense of 'alone in Philistia' was somehow more promising of literary expiation. Merle Hodge's first novel "Crick Crack Monkey", as entertaining and occasionally penetrating as it is, falls into this category. Curiously, this type of writer does not seem to imagine he has, on the surface, anything particularly unique to reveal. The situations, varying from territory to territory, are essentially stock situations. The sensitive child awakes in the tropic morning to the tragic implications of an unfamiliar voice in the next room. He is acutely aware he is an outcast; but

what is most unbearable is that all his people are, and have always been, outcasts. They are oblivious. Sometimes he becomes an outcast from the outcasts, and the sounds of backyard drama are substituted by the smells of the 'country', where he is exiled expediently. It is in the West Indies that this theme achieves its cleanest stereotype: scenes of banality offering intimations of immortality. Every few years a new book is published reiterating the same colonial (or neo-colonial) pathos; the same savage detachments. We are locked in a syndrome in which, since we have inherited no reliable literary tradition, every new author must start from scratch and clearly define his own roots, trusting to no other man's. The genesis of each individual writer is therefore represented as being the genesis of a whole literary genre.

Ladoo has escaped the syndrome sufficiently to have written a story that stands thematically apart. It does not revolve around personal dilemma. In a way, it is as remote and mythological as "The Palm Wine Drinkard." It is a propitious comparison, because in Ladoo's tale, as in Tutuola's, the subjective 'I' is absent, though the writer's alter ego does exist in any one of the characters and denizens that haunt the two journeys into racial psyche.

Another cliché avoided is the glamorization of the tropics, the village, the sib. Even skeptical, divorced novelists sometimes give in to this need to glamorize. Often it occurs unconsciously, as a kind of inevitable propitiation of the gods of their nativity. Indeed their countrymen expect it of them. Some of the severest criticism levelled against Vidia Naipaul, for instance, by Trinidadians stems from precisely his success in having overcome this compulsion. He is accused of not coming to 'terms' with his origins; of being 'uninvolved.' But there is nothing remotely romantic about Tola. There is no mitigating the real hopelessness of being trapped in a perpetual tropical downpour. Rain that is the nemesis of the carat roof. Babwah's little family can no more escape the rain than they can escape their poverty, spiritual and physical. There is nothing inspiring about the internal anarchy of the family, held together by the pure circumstance of the rain, and their common need for shelter. Pa, the traditional head of the group, is the agent of the external chaos. There is degradation in all things: in the elements, the animals, the trees; even the Pandit, the symbol of spiritual authority in the village, is degraded.

There is degradation in the speech of neighbours. The things visitors say are not reassuring to the ears of children living in the terror of the house of their brother's corpse. Ma loves her children, but she is subdued by a patriarchy that is as ancient as India. Her most frequent defence against the violence of her man is to remind him that "I bleed blood to make dat chile. Dat chile come from my belly after I carry him for nine monts. Now you let dat chile come outa dat wadder. I bleed blood to make dat chile." I bleed blood to make dat chile. The point Ladoo makes here is that though he was born in blood the chances are he will die in mud. Blood lettings only weaken the body, and Ma's emaciated frame is the cross upon which little Rama is crucified. There is a certain malicious fitness in this choice of Rama to be sacrificed. He was the child most skeptical of the omnipotence of the God in the sky. He believed God existed, but only in some negotiable forum; like a stone, or even like Pa.

In sheer excess the violence of the adult world spills over onto the children. Twelve year old Balraj's treatment of his little sister Sunaree is an adroit imitation of his father's brutalization of his mother. It is obvious that in him — when he comes to manhood — the cycle of male brutality and female crucified maternity would be repeated. There are times when

Ladoo's violence achieves an almost surrealistic purity. This is intensified by the curtain of water through which so many of the actions are seen, and by Ladoo's extremely odd sound effects. The pain of violence is heard not nearly as often or as sickeningly as the noises of impact: "Still standing on Balraj's chest, Pa threw a blow at Ma's head. It sounded biff! as when a dry coconut falls. Then Pa picked up Balraj as a wet bundle of grass and threw him splash inside the drain."

The little girl Sunaree stands apart; but her separation is subtle and may be overlooked. She is the only one who possesses a concept of universal order; who does not take the pain and anarchy for granted. Of course, like her mother, she is resigned to the inevitable moral and physical abuse, but beyond it she remains spiritually unsubdued. She does things carefully and with a sense of symmetry, whether it is planting rice or making music: "Sunaree played the flute good; her fingers touched the holes of the bamboo flute as if they were made for them. The music of the flute was sweeter than sugar; than life itself." A little Indian girl in Tola can find life sweet, and sometimes profound.

When you are asked to listen to life with the frightened ears of a child, you cannot help wondering for how long. This is not to say Ladoo is long-winded. His novel is no more long-winded than nursery rhymes, but it approaches being as artistically limited and as litanic. There is also a slight impression conveyed that "No Pain Like This Body" is largely a stage through which the writer is anxious to pass to more complex agonies. If so, some of this anxiety rubs off on the reader; which is not necessarily an unfortunate thing. I look forward to reading more of Ladoo.

