Decentring Grand Narratives:

Strategic Liminality in Caribbean Bildungsromane

Caribbean women writers free the colonial subject from being a site of contest between Western ideologies and intangible memory cultures and ask the reader to rethink créolité by expanding its possibilities beyond rigid and limiting discursive formations. The coming of age of Jamaica Kincaid’s and Michelle Cliff’s protagonists thus exemplifies diasporan tactics for transforming established power constellations.

Kincaid’s Annie John and Lucy and Cliff’s Clare Savage in Abeng and No Telephone to Heaven challenge pre-imposed epistemic wealth and negotiate between island orality and ‘modern’ Western thought. Their double consciousness\(^1\) overcomes assimilation and celebrates multiplicity, giving way to a rhizomatic form\(^2\) of culture, where traditional teachings amalgamate with the imperial education of the British West Indies. Through erasure, formation and the synthesis of the two, these texts create improvisational grounds.

The routes to liminality in Caribbean Bildungromane shapeshift in controversial ways. Whereas Kincaid situates her subjects floating in the mutual but mutable third space\(^3\) of the black Atlantic\(^4\), an ambiguous location for translation and negotiation of past into present, Cliff’s heroine delinks from the pre-constructed discursive patterns through death, a counterdiscourse operating as change and continuity. Caribbean epistemologies emerge from an in-between limbo state not perceived as a chaos but a necessary condition for existence that is accomplished in the novels on a real or a metaphysical level. Both authors create a new living potential that disrupts the former epistemological routes, decentring the centre and centring partiality. Newness enters the world\(^5\) in the metamorphic interweaving of histories, cultures, and spiritualities as the borderwomen\(^6\) of the Caribbean gain ways to express their being.

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1. W.E.B. DuBois’s concept for describing the fragmentation of identity
2. Eduard Glissant theorises cultures in a rhizomatic relationship.
3. Homi Bhabha’s ambivalent in-between space
4. Paul Gilroy focuses on black Atlantic as a culture that is at once American, African, Caribbean, and British.
5. The expression is derived from Salman Rushdie’s quote on Satanic Verses and Homi Bhabha’s later essay by the same name.