

Vision in Orlando Patterson's *The Children Of Sisyphus*

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Abstract

West Indian literature of the 1950s and early 1960s was characterized by a heightened sensitivity to prevalent social conditions. Prominent among the features of the literature of this period was the emphasis on social realism and communal experience, as against individual fortunes. While the bulk of Jamaica's wealth was owned by the white establishment and middle class who constituted a minute percentage of the population, the majority of the blacks were the urban dispossessed who inhabited over-congested slums and lived a deprived existence. These slum dwellers frequently adopted survival strategies to combat their exclusion from the Island's wealth. Two of these survival mechanisms were religion-based and to a great extent, inform part of Patterson's vision in *The Children of Sisyphus* which is discussed in this paper. Also, Patterson's vision is conveyed through his interpretation of a Sisyphian myth which reiterates that man is doomed because he is trapped in a tragic world of unending suffering and paradoxes.

INTRODUCTION

As at the time of the publication of *The Children of Sisyphus* (1964), the Jamaican population was estimated at about three million people and out of this, five percent were mainly members of the white establishment and owned ninety-nine percent of the Island's wealth, while the bulk of the blacks were the urban dispossessed who inhabited over-congested slum areas, had a deprived existence and usually worked in temporary blue collar capacities. Also, most of the blacks were barely literate and could not hold down steady jobs. Consequently, self-exploration and definition were prominent features of the literature of this period as were the emphasis on social realism and the focus on communal experience, as against individual fortunes. Also, the slum-dwellers frequently adopted strategies to combat their exclusion from the Island's wealth.

Along with other writers of this period, Patterson addressed himself to the issues confronting his milieu and attempted to fashion a guiding philosophy for West Indians to adopt. This philosophy forms the basis of his vision as projected in *The Children of Sisyphus* (1964) and examined in this paper.

ORLANDO PATTERSON'S VISION IN *THE CHILDREN OF SISYPHUS*

Set in a Jamaican slum, Orlando Patterson's *The Children of Sisyphus* (1964) explores the communal and individual responses of the deprived urban dwellers who live in the dungle. Patterson delves into the life of each character in detail but the ultimate focus is not on their personal fortunes but on their communal responses to their communal fate. Patterson shows that people are brutalized by their degrading milieu to the extent of being unable to form lasting and sustaining interpersonal relationships based on mutual respect and love.

The author bases his explorations on his belief in the absurdity of life, in man's helplessness before fate and also that society is a strong agent of socialization. Like Mais, Patterson shows the dungle dwellers trapped in a recurrent cycle of poverty, dereliction, brutality and failure, but unlike Mais, Patterson holds out no hope of redemption from this hopeless situation because of his belief in the inevitability of fate.

The dungle is a calcified mass of previous accretions of human waste and part of it is still in use as a gabbage dump. It is a symbolic externalization of the fact that the dungle dwellers comprise the human waste in their milieu to be ignored or oppressed when necessary. It is also a microcosm of the Jamaican slum and the urban dispossessed. The characters are differentiated only by names because the particulars of their lives and fates appear to be identical. It is equally a metaphor for the human condition in which man is shown as being engaged in a frequently futile battle against an implacable universe.

Patter shows that since the dungle dwellers live on a gabbage dump, they also act as sub-human beings, for example, they eat from the dump like scavengers, they lack affection for one another, they have deadly and brutal fights and seek devious ways of oppressing one another. This vision of life's absurdity and social determinism is conveyed through Patterson's exploration of several personal responses as pointers to a communal fate and also through his evaluation of the ostensibly utilitarian and redemptive potentials of Rastafarianism and Pentecostalism.

Patterson uses elaborate foreshadowing mainly through Sammy, the gabbage collector to establish that the lives of the people are characterized by poverty, frustration and ubiquitous misery. The three gabbage men with their drooping hats and looks of permanent astonishment can be seen as representing the dungle dwellers, who, according to Sammy are engaged in the continuous meaningless task of survival and live in the perpetual shadow of fear and defeat.

Patterson conveys his perception of the lives of the urban destitutes by exploring two survival mechanisms, namely, Rastafarianism and Pentecostalism. Rastafarianism is a

messianic/millennarian cult based on selective religious beliefs that are of Afro-Christian fusion. The cult bases part of its beliefs on Marcus Garvey's supposed prophesy of redemption coming through a crowned king in Africa, i.e, Haile Selassie I or Rastafari and also on Garvey's belief in the repatriation of all blacks in the Diaspora back to Africa. It preaches absolute belief in Haile Selassie I as the embodiment of the living cult. The adherents also believe in peace and love to all men, especially, black men and disapprove of hate, jealousy, envy and deceit. However, Rastas generally have a public image of violence, criminality and other anti-social acts. They constitute a separatist group and are often also characterized as lazy, dirty and lawless people who use religion to mask their aversion to work and bad habits.

Nevertheless, many lower-class West Indians regard Rastafarianism as a viable means of life which has a philosophy and structure capable of providing a rallying point for the masses in search of social change. The cult also projects the consciousness raising philosophy of the superiority of the black race and eventual mass repatriation to Africa.

In *The Children of Sisyphus*, the Rastas are led by Brother Solomon. They constitute a small weird separatist group who base all their hopes on the possible repatriation to Africa. They are complacent due to their implicit and naïve belief in this repatriation and because of this, they are unable to mobilize themselves either to change their personal circumstances or to pose an organized threat to the bourgeoisie. These Rastas explain away their personal misfortunes as being part of life's trials which must be endured before the coming of the millennium.

Patterson's evaluation of the relevance of Rastafarianism to the plight of the urban destitutes hinges on his observation through Brother Solomon that for the Rastas, happiness is ephemeral and deceptive and that while it lasts, it elevates even the most ordinary person into a deity. The Rastafarian cult as depicted in *The Children of Sisyphus* is a forum for group catharsis and euphoria because it is not based on a well articulated and tangible perception of reality. Also, the Rastas do not attempt in any practical way to translate their dreams of transcending poverty into reality.

Pentecostalism is another religion-based survival mechanism explored in the novel. The Pentecostalists believe in corporate prayer, baptism by the holy spirit and total immersion in water. They also believe in spirit possession and in the ability to speak in tongues and make prophesies. In the novel, Pentecostalism is used by some of the urban dispossessed to understand and try to transcend their existential difficulties. The adherents are led by the charismatic Brother John who has the ability to encourage his followers to temporarily forget their worries through his preachings and prophesy for them.

Patterson also explores the personal responses of some individual characters in order to convey his vision. Through a delineation of the vital inherent weaknesses of these characters, their ambitions and failings, the author illustrates the Sisyphian concept of the hopelessness of man's attempt at self-improvement. Mary is a character who believes in the fundamental superiority of whites over blacks and feels that salvation lies through an affiliation with the whites. She attempts to improve her fortunes through her mulatto daughter, Rossetta who is very intelligent. Mary dotes on the daughter and goes to extreme lengths in order to educate her. It is this desire that motivates Mary to take to prostitution and leads to her eventual brutalization by the police. Mary's sacrifice for Rossetta's future is in vain because after a series of reversals, Rossetta is taken away from her and she becomes deranged by her loss.

Brother Solomon is the leader of the Rastafarians. He is physically imposing and lives in a marginally better dwelling place than the other dungle dwellers. Brother Solomon is regarded as the redeemer by his followers. He is shown to be a caring, self-sacrificing person as evidenced by his giving out his only food items to a needy woman. Brother Solomon is a

well-informed man who understands the white man's hypocrisy and his subtle means of subjugating blacks through Western modes of birth control, white-oriented religion and the implementation of capitalism and oppression of blacks under the guise of economic development.

However, Brother Solomon is seriously flawed as a leader because his vision is induced by a hallucinatory drug and because he seeks salvation through escape to Ethiopia. Furthermore, Brother Solomon is a failed Church of England Minister and this detracts from his leadership potential. His suicide is both an admission of defeat and act of cowardice, for he is unable to face the wrath and disillusion of his deceived followers.

Dianah, on the other hand, is a prostitute who is determined to escape from the dungle. She detests the dirty, noisy communal life of the dungle and wants to enjoy the better things of life. Because of this desire, Dianah becomes mercenary and either abandons or exploits people in order to achieve her purpose. Dianah manages to escape to Jones Town but a series of devious coincidences ensure that she returns and dies in the dungle.

Rachel is the authorial presence and voice in the novel and she interacts with all the characters and continuously warns them about the folly and futility of their ambitions. Through Rachel's observations, the dungle is depicted as a malevolent swamp from which it is impossible to escape and neither does it allow its inhabitants to succeed in any positive ambition. This reflects Patterson's belief in the irreversibility, deterministic influence of society on the individual and in the futility of people trying to avoid their fate. This is illustrated by Rachel's prophesy which in the end comes true of all the characters, such as the Rastas and their aborted repatriation exercise, Mary's lust dreams, Shepherd John's murder and Mabel's invocation of the "fall back" curse on Dianah.

Patterson, thus, exposes the social problems in contemporary Jamaica and by extension, comments on man's tragic fate in life. His vision is in part informed by his evaluation of the relevance of the two survival mechanisms adopted by the people in the novel – Rastafarianism and Pentecostalism – and by his interpretation of a Sisyphian myth which reiterates man's endless and unrelenting labour on earth. The inhabitants of the dungle are the inheritors of Sisyphus's curse and the author consistently shows them as failing in every endeavour to improve their personal fortunes.

Patterson delineates the Rastas as an escapist group who flounder under the misguided and defective leadership of Brother Solomon, while Pentecostalism is characterized as an equally futile survival mechanism. Shepherd John's corruption and lechery prefigure the futility of his religious group and the jealousy which motivates the Elder Mother to murder Shepherd John and frame Dianah for the murder further emphasizes the voidness of this religion.

However, whether or not Patterson's vision emerges naturally from his perception of the Caribbean milieu is arguable. It appears that he carefully selects fundamentally flawed characters such as Brother Solomon and Shepherd John to lead the two main survival mechanisms in the dungle, thus, foreshadowing the failure of these religious movements. Furthermore, improbable coincidences occur in the novel in order to further highlight Patterson's vision. For instance, through a series of strange and unhappy coincidences, Dianah meets Mabel in Jones Town. This leads to their murderous fight and finally to Mabel putting the curse of "ball back" on Dianah. Also, Shepherd John and Dianah suddenly decide to migrate to England and on the eve of their departure, the Elder Mother puts a brutal stop to this plan. Finally, after Dianah has been brutalized by the mop of church-goers, she still falls back to the dungle to die in Cyrus's arms, thus, apparently succumbing to the force of the curse.

Patterson projects a situation of overwhelming and unrelenting misery and failure from which escape is the only solution, since the chances of re-organizing the milieu are

apparently slim, yet, this escape is constantly denied the slum dwellers, giving the impression that they are at the mercy of a capricious force which taunts them with the prospects of success only to strike them down just before they succeed.

In the novel, therefore, Patterson highlights certain responses, both individual and communal which show the Jamaican society, and by extension, the West Indians as a whole, as a group of doomed people for whom success is limited and ephemeral and failure and death are constant. This is an absurd and meaningless world with no hope of an end to labour.

Patterson, thus, recognizes the illogicality of life in which things appear to happen by chance. He projects that man is trapped in a tragic world of continuous suffering and reversals. His actions are without apparent reasons and his fortunes are at the mercy of an abstract, indifferent and often, merciless universal force, called fate.

However, in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* by Albert Camus (1962), although the author acknowledges the fact of life's absurdity, this is not absolutely negative because to him, the very tenacity with which man repeats his hopeless attempts to survive elevates him above his fate of impudence. Also, to Camus, there is an inner strength and resilience which accrues from this continuous battle and a joy which arises from the anticipation of a distant but eventual success. As Camus says: "thus convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see, who knowing that the night has no end, he is still on the go, the rock is still rolling. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to feed a man's heart" (91).

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is clear that Patterson's vision in *The Children of Sisyphus* is one of pessimism. Patterson projects a world where things happen by chance and where man is shown to be engaged in a frequently futile battle against an implacable universe. This vision of life's absurdity and social determinism is conveyed through Patterson's exploration of several personal responses as pointers to a communal fate and also through his evaluation of the ostensibly utilitarian and redemptive potentials of Rastafarianism and Pentecostalism, as well as through his interpretation of a Sisyphian myth which reiterates man's endless and unrewarding labour on earth. Patterson projects that man is doomed because he is trapped in a tragic world of continuous suffering and reversals. His actions are without apparent reasons and his fortunes are at the mercy of an abstract, indifferent and often merciless universal force called fate.

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