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The Colored Girl in the Ring: A Guyanese Woman Remembers by Brenda Chester DoHarris (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Daryl C. Dance

Brenda Chester DoHarris's The Colored Girl in the Ring: A Guyanese Woman Remembers joins the company of some of the most memorable works of Caribbean literature, those classic accounts of coming-of-age, such as George Lamming's In the Castle of My Skin, V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas, Michael Anthony's The Year in San Fernando, Merle Hodge's Crick Crack, Monkey, Erna Brodber's Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home, Zea Edgell's Beka Lamb, Jamaica Kincaid's Annie John, and Beryl Gilroy's Sunlight on Sweet Water. Like most of the bildungsromans—and autobiographies such as Austin Clarke's Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack—the key elements in this work include the almost formulaic picture of the poverty-stricken family home, the struggling parent or parents sacrificing everything to provide an education for their child, the brutal schoolmaster wielding the personalized whip (it usually has a name—here, it is Little Nell), the school curriculum that emphasizes the colonial master's culture and history to the exclusion of anything relevant to our young Caribbean, the inevitable preparation for the examinations (the successful completion of which will offer our protagonist an opportunity of escape), and finally the departure from the Caribbean homeland.
Typically, our heroine is raised in a struggling family. She lives in the little village of Kitty in British Guiana. One of the early memorable scenes is of her first encounter with Little Nell, wielded by Mr. Issac Davis, the teacher of her scholarship class:

I felt rather than heard the whine of the cane slashing through the air before it landed on my back, inflicting its searing, flame-like pain. Before I had time to recover, Mr. Davis struck again, and this time the cane connected with the back of my ear. The stinging tears flooded in my eyes.

"I ask you what goes into twenty-five and sixty and yuh stan’ dere like a kunumunu?" [stupid person] he raged, slowly raising the cane again.

A hush had fallen over the classroom as other students, relieved at being themselves spectators—and not the spectacle on this occasion—put down their pens to enjoy the affair. It was the first time that I had ever been struck in school or beaten publicly. A combined rush of rage and humiliation coursed through me, washing over my fear. Then I felt the wetness down the insides of my legs, the sogginess of my feet in my shoes. (5)

As in all of these bildungsromans, our heroine succeeds at the exams (otherwise, she wouldn’t be successful enough to be writing this “autobiography”). After the suspenseful wait that inevitably follows the sitting of the exams, one day she opens the papers . . . “and then there it was, . . . my name. The first time I had ever seen it in print” (38). At this auspicious moment, she recognizes the significance of the harsh regimen of Mr. Davis’s scholarship class, with its endless hours of drills, fear, intimidation, and emotional and physical pain. She feels also a great sense of the weight of my parents’ sacrifice. I remembered the pelting rain on the day of the scholarship examination when my mother had ridden her bicycle from Kitty to Georgetown, arriving drenched at the examination center at St. George’s Anglican School on Church Street. She brought me lunch because she did not want me to risk illness by going out to nearby Fogarty’s or Booker’s as we had originally planned. (38)

No detail of life in Guyana during the protagonist’s youth (from 1958 when she was twelve until 1964 when
she left Guyana at eighteen) is ignored in this novel. There are brief accounts of the major political events: the unified efforts of those of African and East Indian heritage to win full national independence and their split afterwards as they bitterly contested with each other for political power. There are accounts of the social demarcations in the society, the racial divides, the religious separations, the shadowy world of Obeah, etc., etc. There are details of the everyday, ordinary events in the life of a young Guyanese girl: the tasks she and the women do around the house and especially in the kitchen, the combing of hair, the play (including ring games such as “The Colored Girl in the Ring”), the gossip among the women as they work. The reader is taken with her to school, to Sunday school classes, to the beds of ill relatives, and to the scenes of death.

But the most painful are the many scenes of violence that we witness with our young protagonist: the disfiguring beating her grandfather inflicted upon her mother; the brutal cruelty upper-class colonials imposed on her brother, who was injured while riding through their suburban neighborhood; the verbal and physical abuse her neighbor, Mr. Braithwaite, visited upon his family; the beating of her older friend, Shirley, by Mrs. Cromwell (the wife of Shirley’s lover); the near-killing of her classmate, Steven, by a group of East Indian boys, and the near-killing of Balgobin, the East Indian milkman, in retaliation by a group of black boys (former friends of Steven’s); the stabbing of Shirley by her live-in lover, the policeman, Eustace, when he catches her with James Cromwell; the ensuing suicide of Eustace; and the rampage through her school of a mad soldier with a gun. Some scenes of violence, such as the bleeding bodies of Shirley and Balgobin, are viewed by our protagonist and pictured in chilling detail.

The ultimate effect of this novel, like those bildungsromans that precede it, is that we learn quite a bit
about a particular community/village/yard, but, unlike them, *The Colored Girl in the Ring* reveals very little about its heroine. For example, we are briefly told that she did not feel close to her father, who, she thought, was disappointed that she, his first-born, was not a boy, and then we are told some years after the fact that her father's desertion of their family had been one of the most painful moments in her life; but the details of her suffering are limited; and when she prepares to leave Guyana and presumably sees him for the first time since that desertion, no mention of her emotional response to that meeting or even their conversation is made. We are taken out on bicycle rides with her and her brother, but we become more involved in what happens to her brothers on these rides. We are focused on her family home, but we tend to be more caught up in the events of the Braithwaites next door and all of the sufferings of this poorer household headed by a sometimes funny but more often abusive drunkard. We see her preparing for the exams, but the more interesting episodes involve Steven Osbourne, who takes the exams while shivering with malaria and wears his mama's high-heeled shoes to school when his own shoes fall apart; and Drupattie, the East Indian girl whose father uncharacteristically decides that it is all right for this girl child to get a higher education and even dares to think she might become a doctor. We see our protagonist running errands for her mother, but we are more interested in the events of the ladies to whose homes she is sent, especially Miss Edna and her niece Shirley, who is having an affair with the married Civil Service official, James Cromwell; and Miss 'Gatha, who is preparing to marry the police officer Eustace King, by whom she is at the time having a third child and by whom she is also later jilted. She also mentions her interest in a young man, Michael, and briefly describes their meetings and conversations and even occasional kisses, but we are not provided any of the passion
of their relationship such as we have in the courtship of her friends, Drupattie and Stephen—she hardly even thinks of Michael when she is preparing to leave Guyana. We see our narrator preparing to depart for her trip abroad, but we are more moved by Drupattie’s farewell to our narrator and all of her dreams of an education and fulfillment, desperately sending a note to her true love as she is being whisked away by the unknown husband her uncle has secured for her; and by Gwennie’s departure to work as a domestic in Canada. Our protagonist’s story is told nearly thirty years after she has left Guyana, but all we know of those years is that she has become a writer and a teacher in the Washington, D.C., area.

One day while our protagonist was still in school in Guyana, one of her teachers, Miss Claywell, encouraged her to stop writing about English girls trudging over the moors in deep snow to get to school, a la Enid Blyton, and to appreciate the significance of her own experiences:

“You give validity to your experience when you write about it. You say to the world, ‘Look!—We are here, and we are not going away. We have interesting stories to tell—stories that may be different from yours, but no less worthy of being heard.’ Enid Blyton [sic] has already written her story. Now you can tell yours.” (86)

Fortunately for us as readers, Brenda Chester DoHarris has taken Miss Claywell’s advice to heart and provided at least the gist of the story of what I assume is her fictional counterpart. The story is remarkable for its picture of a Guyanese village, but it requires a sequel to truly explore the life of this nameless narrator, who remains more an onlooker and reporter than the central persona of this piece. DoHarris has fleshed out the “Ring” while leaving us seeking more insight into the being of the colored girl in the ring. And while the stories of these other colored girls in the ring helped to shape our narrator and move her to escape the ring, to go abroad, to control her own destiny, there is a sense of a personality concealed rather than one revealed. I eagerly anticipate
the sequel in which the cameras may, one hopes, be focused on the unnamed and unexplored colored girl in the ring.

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