S

h

el

ley, in his preface to “Prometheus Unbound”, said, “Poets, not otherwise, than philosophers, painters, sculptors and musicians, are in one sense, the creators and in another, the creations, of their age”. I add to Shelley’s list of creators the calypsonian, who, too, is in one sense, the creator and, in another, the creation of his age. To me, the calypsonian is the consummate artist, who by the use of language, music and mime, paints a portrait of our society which mirrors a truth, that is sometimes too painful to bear.

And what is this truth? What is in this portrait that the calypsonian paints of the women in our society? What or whom do we see reflected in the mirror, that this unique artiste holds up to this multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious society of ours?

The 1998 World Book Multimedia encyclopedia in treating with the subject, calypso, tells the world, that a favourite topic of the calypsonian is “women”. Many are the women who have been immortalized by the calypsonian: ‘Netty, Netty’, what you really had in your belly, girl? Matilda, you really take Radio “money and run Venezuela?” Jean and Dinah, Rosita and Clementina, all yuh real like the Yankee dollar, yes. Mae-Mae, did Sparrow really make love to you on the beach? Maria, Blakie, love you real bad, girl. Dorothy, you are a perennial favourite. Stalin and all believe in you. Melida, and one-foot Vizzie, you really wanted a wedding ring so badly? Stella, you made Nelson cry, girl. He love you Stella. Tiney Winey, Audrey, Mabel, Ethel, Emily, all of you have something in common, and now Chanchance join the lime. Indrani and Maharajin, just like Chanchance, some like to pretend that you still sleeping like Tina, but we know you wake up a long time ago.

The calypsonian, in singing about women and in ascribing to them certain characteristics, whether these be physical attributes or behavioural patterns of which he may, or may not approve; in regaling us with tales of his relationships with his women, reveals much more about himself and the society in which he lives than he discloses about the women of whom he sings.

It is in this light that I propose to discuss the controversial calypso of the day: ‘Bottom in the Road’ - and other calypsos. I must say though, that I am at a loss to understand the furor that erupted over Iwer George’s offering for this Carnival. After all, the man is a self-confessed ‘boom boom’ master. (And he is by no means unique on that score.) He has made no secret of his preoccupation, preference, predilection, propensity, call it what you will, for the boom boom.

When you enter the arena of the “boom boom” year in, year out, and refuse to leave, something’s got to give. You bound to end up
in plenty commess. To clean up this boom boom commess, more commess emerges from another orifice with the result that we get more outpourings, to wit, “I did not mean to offend or degrade anybody”. ‘Bottom in the road’ means you looking good. “I wanted to big up the Indian woman.” I thought he was making the point that she was now “big up” where she was not before. Thus, Iwer, the star boy, must trek where he has not trod before. Fortunately for the “boom boom” master, he possesses the talent to perfume his commess with a spicy humour and a sensuous rhythm.

In his calypso, Iwer speaks of his sexual experiences in terms of “having” girls of several nationalities. He has sampled all the ethnic groups except “ah Indian”. In our patriarchal society, the men are endowed with power and privilege as of right. Woven into the fabric of our society, is the ideology of gender, the assumptions that govern male and female behaviour, presumptions that dictate how men and women relate to each other and the expectations they have of each other. Male supremacy and dominance is seen as the natural order of things. “Iwer, the conqueror”, is the fantasy of all men. Here is a man in control of female sexuality. For a man “a deputy is essential”. He must have “both of them”. And if he is an American president, he must have a hundred of them. For a woman, having a deputy may mean death.


Our social codes ordain that men assume responsibility for initiating and orchestrating sexual contact .... There is no way around the fact that power relations have become a key component in sexual relations.

Kaufman found that men “often experience sex in terms of power”. “Getting it makes (them) feel strong, in control, a man” (*ibid.*). “Toro! Toro! Charge!”

Kaufman quotes the British writer Lynne Segal who noted that “man’s greater power in the world and the particular construction of masculinity both allow and encourage men to express domination and power through sex” (*ibid.*:107).

On the other side of the coin (I hesitate to use the word equation) of male supremacy, is women’s subordination to and subjugation by men. Iwer’s Chunchanee is not his equal. She is not referred to as “woman” but variously as “girl, lady, sister”. Each of these words connotes a female in need of the protection of a conquering hero. He didn’t “come out to equalize”. Iwer does not see his role as one of exploitation but as one of performing a service. After all, “to get a Trini creole, is she wish”. Iwer’s manifestation of the social construct of his masculine role is one which is the creation of his age and ages past.

Kaufman asserts that “patriarchy the world over has become a dense network of social, cultural, economic, religious and political institutions, structures and relationships which pass on control through men from generation to generation” (*ibid.*: 303). A similar proposition is advanced by Bina Agarwal in her discourse on “Patriarchy and the Modernising State”. She found that “the ideology (of gender) played a crucial role in the social construction of gender and in the process of women’s subordination”. She expressed the view that “the family, the community, the media, the educational, legal, cultural and religious institutions, all variously reflect, reinforce, shape and create prevailing ideological norms - norms which may well conflict with and contradict one another, and usually vary in their specification and enforcement across classes and regions”.
In the calypso under discussion we see Chanchanee’s family, in the form of her brother, trying vainly to exert some degree of control over her sexuality. The fall-out from the calypso involved most of the socializing agencies having their say - members of the community, religious leaders, the media and there was even an attempt to employ the big stick of the law, an event which revealed much more about the media, than it did about the law, as an instrument of social control.

‘Bottom in the Road’ has sexual overtones. It is offensive in so far as it degrades the woman by making her into a sexual object to be used and discarded. It reduces the sum total of her being to one body part - a bottom. It is, however, by no means in the class of some of the crudely offensive calypsos of yesteryear and today. Nobody complained about Mr. Benwood Dick when he came. We were all invited to see “Miss Mary big and hairy,” and those of us who were around sang lustily that “ah frawd, ah frawd, ah frawd the pussy bite me.” When the lizard ran up Teacher Mildred’s dress and disappeared all of us helped her to search crying, “Where the Lizard, Teacher Mildred?” We watched Congo Man eat the white women raw. Whereas these calypsos portray women as sexual objects for man’s pleasure and satisfaction, other calypsos speak of men’s fear of women. Jules Henry in his book, Culture Against Man (1996: 165) states:

Throughout our history, men and women have feared being used by one another. Men have been afraid of not meeting the challenge to their masculinity posed by physical relationships with a woman and they have feared that the woman, having used them up, would throw them away.

Over the years, calypsonians have sung of the fickleness and deceitfulness of women and even of their propensity for wickedness. Thus Atilla singing about Eugene, the Martiniquian whom he had lavished with gifts, said that she had a “look of innocence in her eyes but was a devil in disguise”. Atilla must have been very unlucky with women because he also sang, “Man Santapee, bad, bad, Woman Santapee, more than bad”. Another of his calypsos about women warns that ‘Women is Not the Weaker Sex’.

In the 1940’s, King Radio sang heartbreakingly of Matilda who had taken his money and run Venezuela. The Mighty Terror’s, “Chinee children calling me Daddy”, expresses a real fear of many men in the society - that of getting “horned” and “getting stuck” with the product of that “horn”. The Roaring Lion seemed also to have been hurt by a pretty woman to cause him to sing, ‘Ugly Women’, in which he advised that, “if you want to be happy and live a king’s life, never make a pretty woman your wife’. And poor Zandolie found that his wife had too much man family and ordered her to “write all her family name on a piece of paper for him”.

Many years before that Lord Invader had sung, ‘Rum and Coca-Cola’ in which he lamented the immorality of the women in Trinidad prostituting themselves for the Yankee dollar. This self-same theme was to be found in the calypso which sky-rocketed the Mighty Sparrow into stardom: ‘Jean and Dinah’. Fear of commitment, which is regarded as entrapment, is one which some men have to come to terms with. It is a theme which finds its way into calypso in Sparrow’s ‘Obeah Wedding’ where he sings of his good fortune in escaping Melda’s clutches. She had wedding plans.

While many calypsonians can be described as sexist, only a few can be said to
espouse the ideology of misogyny, which has been described as:

the belief system that rationalizes or justifies violence and terrorism against women and girls. It embodies extreme prejudice against females and defines women and girls as inferior beings who must be subordinated because of their resistance to the natural order of male supremacy and dominance. This belief system generates permission to control and dominate women and to use whatever means are necessary to do so.

It is in this category that one would place Atilla’s ‘Treat them rough’ and Gypsy’s ‘Ram it’, the former advocating physical abuse to keep women in line and the latter, sexual violence and in which, the crime of rape, is treated as a joke.

In our society where incest is the order of the day, where rape of women and children have escalated to epidemic proportions, where sexual crimes are not treated with as much urgency as drug related crimes or placed on the fast track as murder is, where rape in marriage has not yet been criminalized, we need to begin a process of re-creation of our place to make it safer for our women. As I recall, it was a man who said he was willing to sleep with the devil, but the way women are being killed by the spouses with whom they shared a bed, it would seem that it is women who are sleeping with the devil. A good road march for battered wives if they want to bring out a band from the shelter would be: ‘Look the devil dey’.

The cries of pain, as enunciated by some of our female calypsonians, such as Singing Sandra’s in ‘Dignity’, the call to retake one’s life as urged by Singing Francine in ‘Runaway’, and the celebration of women’s achievements by Eastlyn Orr in ‘Woman Rising’ are all steps in the right direction of consciousness raising of the plight of women in this patriarchal society.

In advancing our cause for equality we need to take note of the dignity of her Majesty, Calypso Rose, in her calypso ‘I thank Thee’, and the courage of Denyse Plummer who persisted despite her humiliation and earlier non-acceptance. Songs like ‘Ka Ka Lay Lay’ and others of that ilk and their accompanying performance do not help our cause.

The backlash against women in the society was not created by the calypsonian who merely reflects or reinforces this reality, but by men’s reluctance to yield power. In analysing this phenomenon, Michael Kaufman and Eimar O’Neill in an article on Men’s Violence explained:

the way we construct (men’s) power in the world and in our lives brings enormous pain both to women, and in a different way, to men. The cost to be a man is to bury a whole range of emotions, sensitivity, connectedness, capacity to nurture...

Sensitivity in men is interpreted to mean weakness and as Penguin tells us “women doh like soft man”. To return to Kaufman and O’Neill (1991).

What is happening now though, is that there are real challenges to men’s power. The equilibrium has shifted. Men’s right to power has been questioned and in some spheres their real power has been reduced; men are experiencing the pain more and more. For many this is a threat, and some are acting it out against women and children even more...

At the individual level, the best way to show yourself and the world that you have power and control is by exercising it around you, over those human beings who are defined as not having any, that is, women and children.

Women’s chastisement is sanctioned by the society who urges: “You beat up your wife? Ah say worse than that”. But the man who kills his unfaithful wife won’t be guilty of murder. Oh
Kaufman and O’Neill’s rationale of violence gives a logical explanation for the increasing violence not only in Canadian society, but also in our society and in societies around the world. It is in this context that the crime of rape must be seen, not as a sexual crime, but as a crime of violence which is particularly degrading and wounds both the woman’s body and soul.

Susan Brownmiller (1975), in her book Against Our Will, Men, Women and Rape, states:

just as the act of intercourse itself is deliberately perverted in rape by forcing it on an unwilling participant so too, the purpose of any sidebar activity is to further humiliate and degrade. With respect to oral sex - few rapists showed interest in cunnilingus. What they demanded was fellatio done on them. What these rapists were looking for was another avenue or orifice by which to invade and thus humiliate their victim’s physical integrity, her private inner space.

The views of women expressed by the calypsonian are not of his creation, but are merely reflective of the truth of men’s pain being played out, with us as their victims. The calypsonian merely records and reinforces the prevailing ideological norms.

But all is not lost, it is not all sorrow and despair. There is a rainbow on the horizon. With the help of groups such as Men Against Violence Against Woman, UWI’s Women and Development Studies Group, and the Centre for Gender Studies, Working Women and The Caribbean Association of Feminist Action and Research (CAFRA), we can begin the process of reconstructing masculinity, we can begin the re-socialisation process. We can intervene in the formal and informal educational sector to raise consciousness, to eliminate the barriers to positive relationships between men and women and to build a bridge to an understanding between them that they are equal but different, that each is worthy of respect. “The road is long with many a winding turn”, let us walk it together for our children’s sake. “The journey now start.” And when it’s at an end perhaps then we can sing, “Ay Ay Ay Ay Ay Ay, I love my country. Come let we celebrate ...”


