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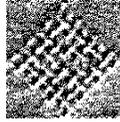
*I Dream to Change the World
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Changing Caribbean Worlds: One Romance at a Time



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The Caribbean has long been the site of “European eroticized romantic fantasies” (Edmondson 4). But what do notions of romance with its twin children – beauty and respectability- have to do with the struggle to articulate a national identity and more specifically a voice for the black woman in a post-colonial society? One aspect of the Caribbean’s response is evident in the short-lived Heineman Caribbean Caresses series which patterns itself on the Mills and Boon/Harlequin line. Through the stylized conventions of the genre, writers attempt to address issues such as code choice, setting, point of view and ideological shifts in discourse. Changes in the characterization of the male and female protagonists are also indicative of changing values in the society. An exploration of these issues as present in these texts, provides important clues as to the potential of popular romance as a tool for not only investigating a society’s standards but also as a tool for conveying transformational change.

Lola Young observes that:

as black people increasingly engage with academia the issue of the appropriateness of Eurocentric academic discourse to the study of Black texts and cultural criticism has become a site of intense speculation and avid contestation. Ethnocentrism is a defining characteristic of a vast body of European and Anglo-American theoretical writing and it is important for Black cultural commentators and analysts to respond by critically engaging with that material. (177)

Therefore the issue of representation within genre, perspective, orientation of the narrating person to the concerns of the post-colonial world are of interest in addressing the problem of an appropriate form for black expression. The contestation over appropriateness of form also takes place in the field of popular culture. Despite the many criticisms of the value or lack thereof, Nachbar and Lause argue that “We do not study the artifacts and events of popular culture as ends in themselves... but as a means of examining the underlying cultural mindset which those artifacts and events both reflect and mould” (33). The study of popular culture is therefore framed by an understanding that it is the degree to which the popularity of the genre reflects the beliefs of the wider community in which it originates that is the focus, and not primarily its literary value. In this context therefore, Caribbean forays into the field of popular romance genre provide the basis for a compelling case study of how Caribbean authors have attempted to negotiate the

constraints of genre – more specifically the strategies used to infuse a Caribbean focus and, ultimately, the significance of this attempt.

Within the Caribbean, issues of form, genre and code choice are clearly linked to the issue of appropriateness of inherited forms to articulate a Caribbean-centred identity. This is not an issue confined to the Caribbean. Ngugi has argued that colonized peoples in the West, as in Africa, have also inherited a literary tradition that emphasizes the passivity of the native person in relation to the colonial authority. In the genre of the popular romance, the Caribbean author has the job of countering traditional images of both the black woman and the black man. According to Collins there are three dominant stereotypes that have been associated with the black woman: the mammy figure, the matriarch and the whore. The mammy figure is the overweight, asexual, devoted black worker who has no life apart from her white family. The matriarch is the mother of many. Critics like bell hooks deride this stereotype for masking the fact that societal and political processes kept so-called “matriarchs” employed in menial tasks, denying them any real access to the power implicit in the term. And there is the whore. According to Wyatt: “If black girls wear short or tight clothes they are assumed to be ‘oversexed’; if they have too much makeup on, it suggests that they have no class. If their behaviour is loud or boisterous, it shows a lack of proper training. Adolescent girls seen kissing or “hugging up under a boy” in public are presumed to be sexually active and to have no concern for their own or their family’s reputation” (101).

Black men have also been associated with certain stereotypes coming out of the experience of slavery. Dominant discourses were based on the premise that black men were intellectually inferior to whites, morally degenerate and useful only for their physical prowess which had to be constructively channelled by their superiors. Commenting on the stereotype, Marable observes that: “Black men were only a step above the animals – possessing awesome physical power but lacking in intellectual ability. As such their proper role in white society was as laborers, not as the managers of labor” (“Black Male” 444). It is thus important that in the Black community a man must be able to prove his love for his woman. George Nelson underscores this point:

He wants his woman to believe in his love precisely because so many others won’t... You have to remember that being a Black man is to experience love burdened by both fault-finding sociologists in best-selling books and the clichés of old wives tales[...] An infidelity, a romantic misstep, a lover’s quarrel are often judged not on an individual basis but under a microscope of negative expectation. (272)

Much of the sentiments expressed above also hold true for the Caribbean where the reality that the romance attempts to make more palatable, continues to be very challenging in terms of successful heterosexual relationships. Brown and Chevannes, for example, identify five areas of ongoing tension between black men and women that account for “high degrees of distrust and disillusionment” (20). These are: differing views on male-female fidelity; the notion that men should have ultimate power and authority; expectations of men as primary source of family

finances; division of domestic labour across traditional gender lines; and domestic violence results from broken relationship contracts (qtd in Barriteau 20).

Another area of concern is that the adoption of the romance may invalidate non-stereotypical family patterns. Barriteau citing work done by Barrow notes that men in the Caribbean often choose the roles that they perform and these may not be limited to those of “provider and disciplinarian” (10). Contemporary Caribbean romances show significant attempts to address some of these issues in that both women and men are portrayed in non-traditional roles; but again this is restricted by the fact that at the end of the novel, the female protagonist ideally reassumes her traditional position in relation to the male who becomes the primary provider.

Popular romance is thus a significant site of contestation for both black males and black females because within the romance are the ideals of society based on European/white standards of male and female perfection, social standing, wealth and maintenance of social order – so representation, or lack thereof, makes an explicit statement of how certain people are viewed. Meehan writes that whites were not only the leaders of state institutions but “were also the exemplars of the civilization to which the blacks were expected to aspire” (127).

The characteristic mode of portraying the colonies and its inhabitants primarily by means of the stereotypical represent important ideologies established during slavery that continued after emancipation. After emancipation, in the former colonies it was the mixed race woman who was held to be a more acceptable figure of femininity than the full black woman. According to Lady Nugent (a governor’s wife) the mulatto woman’s experience of pregnancy and childbirth more closely resembled the white woman’s:

Nelly Nugent remarked, however, that it was astonishing how fast these black women bred, what healthy children they had, and how soon they recovered after lyin-in. She said it was totally different with mulatto women, who were constantly liable to miscarry and subject to a thousand little complaints, colds, coughs & c. Indeed, I have heard medical men make the same observation. (69)

By virtue of her superior blood and womanly characteristics (frail and vulnerable) the mulatto woman was held to be a more acceptable standard of femininity than her darker sister. In *Questing Heart*, a romance novel set against an island backdrop, which appears in the early twentieth century it is apparent that stereotypes of blacks in general had changed little:

The lives of the Trinidad blacks are as near happiness as life can possibly be. With few possessions and fewer wants they are happy, inconsequent creatures, living only to eat and drink and perpetuate their species, which last they do by living together of just so long as it please either the man or the woman. (143)

Thus, within the romance, as Meehan has noted, erotic and political registers of meaning are linked, which point to the underlying power struggles within the community. Through the

romance, the progress of the blacks to civility is charted in their attempts not only to love but also to embody the characteristics that would proclaim them worthy of love. Thus, to employ a transformational focus within the romance genre must of necessity involve a re-working or a stretching or, as Valerie Belgrave so appropriately summarizes it, “a changing of the terms of reference” to black beauty as it is presented in the genre.

The Caribbean response to its historical role as “the matrix of European eroticized fantasies” to a certain extent is seen in Heinemann’s Caribbean Caresses series which patterns itself on the Mills and Boon/Harlequin line. Meeting, conflict and resolution between the couple are the major structural components of this brand. Rabine, writing of the Harlequin/Mills and Boon line, breaks down these components into the following stages: Introduction of hero and heroine, their meeting; initial attraction/conflict between them; romantic conflicts/heroine’s qualms about hero; counterbalance to developing romance, that is sensual scenes, growth of love vs conflicts; hero’s role in creating conflict; resolution of conflicts and happy ending leading to marriage (182).

The central dilemma for the Caribbean romance writer is thus how to rewrite the generic prescriptions from a black or other perspective which involves a delicate balance between a complete rejection of an identity imposed through a western inheritance and one arrived at as a result of transforming and expanding this identity. The significance of the Caribbean Caress Series must therefore be seen against the background of the images of black femininity that are being countered.

The series was launched in 1993 with five novels: *Sun Valley Romance* by Valerie Belgrave, *Heartaches and Roses* by Dorothy Jolly, *Fantasy of Love* by Deidre D’Allan, *Love in Hiding* by Annette Charles, *Hand in Hand* by Lynn Ann Ali, and *Merchant of Dreams* by Lucille Colleton. The focus has been to be true to generic constraints, while at the same time bringing Caribbean peoples and culture into centre stage. Caribbean writers of the romance attempt to confront the challenge of the exclusion of the non-white woman from the genre by grounding their female characters firmly in their local environment. This is evident in the races to which the main characters belong. The characters that appear here are Afro or Indo Caribbean but not Caucasian. The female protagonists are professional women, who combine the strength of their domestic mothers with the educational achievements that they have themselves accrued – in a nod, no doubt, to their respective nation’s move to establish independence.

One of the most obvious signs through which these Caribbean writers attempt the transformation of the genre is through characterization – one of the most easily recognizable features of popular romance. Stock features are applied to an ethnically diverse population. Thus, in *Hand in Hand*, Khadija, who is Indian is described by Mr. Singh, her future father-in-law, as he traces: “...her features, from her wide brow to her straight nose, over her rounded cheeks. He lingered a moment on her full lips, moved to her dimpled chin” (37). The wide brow, the straight nose are easily recognizable features of the European female protagonist of the genre. Further her hair is

described by the male protagonist, Andel as "...a midnight black rainfall, well past her waist. It is her most exquisite feature" (17). The change of reference is also seen in the black protagonists such as Erica in *Fantasy of Love*, where stereotypically black features are presented in a positive light: "mahogany-brown skin- brown eyes so dark they were almost black, short curly black hair...Maybe her mouth was a little small, but people always said she had a lovely smile" (4). Generic expectations are thus re-deployed.

In occupation female protagonists are very far removed from the traditional stereotypical roles of servants or nannies to doctors, businesswomen and advertising executives. Khadija is a university professor, Erica is a business consultant, and Giselle in *Sun Valley Romance* is a university student. They fit generic stereotypes of the female protagonist to the extent that they are all slim (with one exception – the female protagonist of *Merchant of Dreams* where the heroine is overweight though here the male protagonist argues that "...the two most over-rated things in the world were being under twenty-five years old and having a waistline under twenty-five inches" (64-65).

There is still the traditional emphasis on the protagonist's femininity marked here by the blush. The blush is a significant feature of maidenhood in traditional Western culture and true to form the Caribbean protagonists can blush with the best of romantic heroines. This ability is playfully mocked by the male protagonist in *Fantasy of Love*: "...some people believe that dark-skinned people don't blush'. 'Do you?' 'She replied quite sharply... Yes, I do blush on occasion – Perhaps you'll have the opportunity to discover under what circumstances." (12). Morgan highlights the significance of this ability to blush in "Like Bush Fire in my Arms" noting that it is important for heroines of all complexions, because "it replaces virginity as a measure of innocence after the couple have indulged in pre-marital intercourse" (10).

Generic considerations are also met and extended in the characterization of the male figures. The generic male protagonist is as Talbot observes "physically perfect, powerful and dominating. They are embodiments of hegemonic masculinity, presented as desirable, highly eroticized and utterly irresistible" (107). Male protagonists in Caribbean Caresses are literally tall, dark and handsome with that indefinable presence which enables them to command the entire room as in *Fantasy of Love* where Dr Julian Baird, the male protagonist "...walked to and fro as he talked...His strategy of walking and talking seemed to work as everyone followed his progress with their eyes and heads. He seemed to have the entire room under his control" (22-23). Andel in *Hand in Hand* is described as a "tall, scowling figure ...tightly muscled body packed into a black tank top and running shorts" when the female protagonist first sees him. They are also well-educated. The male protagonist in *Sun Valley Romance* is distinguished by "a voice, that apart from its exciting rich timbre, held just a trace of something foreign" (15). He is also an "...imposing figure of a man. ...a little over six feet tall...And he was slim, but solid. Not thin. His skin was a true brown colour...His face was beautifully sculptured with a high intelligent forehead and a long aristocratic nose." (26-27). Here, the features associated with the European male in the high forehead and long nose

are again transposed to a Caribbean setting. Male protagonists are financially well-off or at least have the potential to be as is the case with Damien, the protagonist of *Merchant of Dreams* who is an independent sales agent and model. In *Hand in Hand* the male protagonist is a doctor, in *Fantasy of Love* an environmentalist and in *Heartaches and Roses*, a hotel manager. Attempts are also evident to include a more liberal perspective with regard to the accommodation that the male protagonists are willing to make to prove their love for the female protagonists. Anel for example, is willing to give up a medical career in London to settle in Tobago to be near to Khadija who refuses to leave the West Indies. Julian fights back against the stereotype of the metropolitan black alienated from his double inheritance: "I am not the stereotype of a person of West Indian descent in Britain, knowing only about reggae and dance hall. I can also appreciate Bach and Beethoven. Indeed, many of us can... People should never be stereotyped." (40)

The extension of generic features in the characterization of the main protagonists has not been without controversy. For some critics, the genre of the romance with its emphasis on the beautiful is inappropriate to discuss the real. Morgan for example, condemns *Fantasy* for being "too real": "The protagonist's round dark brown face is unadorned, her nails short and unpolished and she is overweight such that the man of her dreams has to purchase a flattering swimsuit, to convince her that her body can be appealing in swimwear" (13). On the other hand, the same novel elicits the opposite view from another critic – Bryce, who argues that the insertion of the overweight protagonist is one of the triumphs of the text. Bryce writes that "the hero exhibits the prevailing Barbadian male appreciation for exorbitant female flesh, while more importantly admiring her for her talent and application" (22). The differing perspectives point to one of the problem areas in re-negotiating the romance. Attempts to place Caribbean peoples within the confines of a genre in which characters are idealized, leaves the writer open to the claim of alienating the very public that he/she is trying to reach. On the other hand, attempts to incorporate the reality of the Caribbean that the writer inhabits results in accusations of unfaithfulness to the "institutionalized literary model".

There is also some dissonance in the characterization of the female protagonists as well. Certainly, a major problem faced by Caribbean writers is how to combat the pressure of the point of view of another stereotype – that of the strong, assertive Caribbean woman – while maintaining "the attributes or reticence, modesty and sexual innocence until recently considered desirable by the western formula" (Bryce 23). The conceptual perspective of most heroines in the Caribbean series, remains one marked for the most part by insecurity, anxiety and passivity, where they always seem to be struggling for control. Erica has to make a presentation:

She was so nervous that it took all her self-control to keep her hands from shaking...she started hesitantly. She knew her voice sounded weak...And then she looked up and her eyes meet his... It seemed almost as if he was willing her to be calm...she took a deep breath and launched boldly into her explanation. (25)

Here it is the male protagonist who lends his strength to the female to give her the needed encouragement to believe in the worth of her ideas. The female protagonist takes part in a limited amount of active dialogue which contributes to her passive characterization. In *Fantasy of Love*, again, it is the male protagonist who also gives his partner the power to change the negative things in her life like a former unfaithful boyfriend. Her thoughts, too, are frequently punctuated by rhetorical questions which serve to underline her insecurity.

The novels attempt to transform the genre by playing with and then countering other stock features such as the absence of strong familial ties in the protagonists' lives. In *Heartaches and Roses*, the protagonist has a sister but no parents; Erica has parents who live far away in the country. But there is some resistance to this practice in *Hand in Hand*, however, where there is a strong maternal presence in Mrs. Mohammed, the mother of the female protagonist Khadija, though she lacks power to deter the progress of the romance – Khadija goes out with Andel despite her mother's disapproval. In *Sun Valley Romance* Giselle lives with her mother. Belgrave envisions an expanded role for the community which plays an integral part in the protagonists' romance through the introduction multiple perspectives and voices, as reflective of Caribbean social relations. This contributes to indigenizing the form as opposed to the traditional tight focus on the lovers. Subsidiary characters therefore also become focalizers for part of the action of the plot. In *Sun Valley Romance* and *Hand in Hand*, parents as well as siblings share in the narration of the story.

Changing perspectives also involve a re-negotiation of modern and traditional skills. In *Heartaches and Roses* the protagonist is "a good housekeeper and an excellent cook". She is shrewdly able to maintain her figure by promptly giving away all the pastry and cakes that she bakes to the neighbours' children. Like beauty contestants, protagonists have a social cause. Erica in *Fantasy of Love* for example, displays her concern for the development of her "native islanders" when she muses, "If we could teach them relevant words in the languages of the countries to which they go – can you imagine how much better they'd do?" (44). Erica seems the most strident of the protagonists in her questioning of the role of women in the development of the islands: "And why not a female consultant this time? Men always think only men should do the power jobs. I'm sure we can do this just as well without a man's help. Most of the projects involve women anyway" (21). Thus, the issue of female empowerment in development is raised but never quite satisfactorily addressed as by the end of the novel Erica is quite content in her role of lending her ideas to her husband to be in his task to be at the forefront of national development.

Another important aspect of popular romance lies in the invocation of setting which functions as the backdrop that contextualizes the battle of the sexes, and includes elements such as details of clothes, possessions and geographical details. In this sense, in the Caribbean Caresses series the traditional view of the Caribbean is maintained as the unexplored, with its connotations of mystery and allure, traditionally feminized and eroticized in imperial discourse. In the physical setting, the novels meet but do not challenge the expectations of the genre. In keeping with the

requirements of form, the Caribbean is presented as one purged of social and political unrest. Time markers are generally omitted since it is the importance of the emotional experience that characterizes the story. There is the heavy traffic on the streets, heavily wooded hills, mountains and mist which appear as overt attempts to present the Caribbean in a manner consistent with the genre. Little reference is made to specific landmarks outside of airports, and capital cities like Port of Spain and Kingston – the capitals of Trinidad and Jamaica, respectively. The same superficiality can be observed in *Hand in Hand* where the “ridge” on which Khadija and her family live, complete with the “blue and majestic” “Bald Mountain” in the background, seem obvious attempts to present the Caribbean setting in terms consistent with the genre. Ironically, the one novel – *Heartaches and Roses*– that sets the scene in a hotel is deemed the most “thematically weak and unfocussed” (Morgan 11).

This is not to argue that there is no attempt in the novels to creolize the physical setting. This job is carried in the novels by the flora, traditional dress and food. In *Heartaches and Roses* there is the melding of the foreign and the local in the variety of flowers outside the protagonist’s hotel window in the “sweet-smelling roses of different hues and white lilies mingled with pink anthuriums and the red flowers of the Chaconia (that) sway gently in the breeze” (1). In *Hand in Hand*, Muslim dress in the form of the Shalwar help to bring out the beauty of Khadija’s “well-defined brows and sparkling brown eyes” (21). The “thin silk of her tunic” becomes the point of erotic contact between the protagonists. Creole food in the form of breadfruit and codfish, and local drinks like coconut cream and rum punch complement the local backdrop against which the romance takes place, though in doing this, there is the danger of invoking old stereotypes as evident in the claim of the narrator of Marly (1828) who notes that after emancipation, Europeans still journey to the West Indies because “though it may not be a country like the one of old, promised to the children of Israel, as flowing with milk and honey, it, at any rate, is one flowing with rum and sugar, equivalents... in no way inferior to milk and honey” (6). Writers have been more successful in attempting to transform the social setting of the romance. In *Hand in Hand*, aspects of life in an Indian, Muslim family are palpably felt. A strong sense of the social setting is also apparent in *Sun Valley Romance* where Giselle and her friends enjoy themselves at parties (fetes) organized around Carnival time. The strains of steelband music and calypso form part of the background. Particularly in this novel is a strong sense of an active village life, with colourful characters like “Big Willie” and “Tiny Ramjohn”.

Difficulties still arise in the process of extending the form in the sense that issues of the emerging society seem at times to threaten to break through the popular romance frame. The urgency of self-government and self-determination is hinted at in *Fantasy of Love*, where Erica scribbles to her friend during a consultancy meeting with a foreign firm, “I wonder when we’ll realize that we don’t always need overseas consultants to explain ourselves to ourselves” (21). In *Merchant*, Morgan points out that “there are references to the theft of washing off the line, small cramped housing developments, unemployed men who wash cars unrequested in the hope of making small change to feed hungry families, unsavoury hotel rooms. Indeed, the frame of this text is decidedly

unglamorous” (“Like Bushfire” 13). Bryce writes that the very specifications given to romance writers:

alert us to the first of the problems of relocating the romantic formula outside its own cultural parameters. A gap exists. This gap is one of realistic representation of a region constructed in the discourse of tourism as ‘Paradise’, and in romance fiction as exotic backdrop to the intimate involvements of alien protagonists. How is this gap to be filled, when the ‘real’ Caribbean is required to reinscribe the fantasy of ‘escape’? If the heroes and heroines of the north escape the cold and the pressures of work and family by going on Caribbean cruises, what are Caribbean men and women to do? (“World” 13)

Bryce’s comment would seem to suggest that there is the problem of bridging the gap between the real and the unreal: attempting to internationalize the Caribbean scenery elicits a charge of complicity with European ideology and attempting to indigenize it results in a jarring dissonance within the genre. The reception to these elements within the texts show as Smith has pointed out, “catering to this market is perhaps more complex and certainly more contradictory than we may think...” (179).

Certainly, a significant strategy in the attempt to transform the genre is to incorporate both creole and standard forms of English within the text. The issue of code choice is an ideologically charged one in the context of characterization in the contemporary romance. There is a tradition in writings based in the region to use creole as Lalla observes for “... local colour, part of the setting or a humorous touch to a description, or a negative feature of characterization” (31). In terms of tradition, in the romance *Creole Enchantment* (1934) there is the same use of creole speech to characterize the simplicity of the black and coloured characters in the text. Here creole is marked by its range of departure from Standard English through the elision of certain letters: ‘yo’ for you; ‘fo’ instead of for; and substitution of ‘d’ for th in words like father and that. Though not in the same derogatory manner, contemporary romances attempt to show their alliance with conventionality in their use of Standard English to narrate the text and to characterize the main protagonists. One of the arguments in favour of Standard English is no doubt readability in that it is presumed that the texts are prepared for an international as well as regional audience. But in this attempt, the texts seem to clumsily collude with traditional representations of local voices rather than extend the range. While in the Caribbean Caresses series Standard English is used throughout the text and to characterize the main protagonists, creole is used to characterize persons who are overbearing, contentious or meddlers though not necessarily poorly educated. In *Fantasy of Love*, for example, in a description of less than cordial relations between two female characters, creole syntax appears in the term “handle” – meaning to not get along with – when the narrator observes that “Jenny couldn’t handle Gillian.” In *Merchant of Dreams*, the odious boss, Mr. Farmer on leaving the office, tells his staff in creole, “good, I gone”. In *Heartaches and Roses*, the male protagonist’s meddling mother tells her son in creole, “I had a headache and

dizziness today, Randy, and my arthritis was giving me real horrors.” (187). These examples still seem to underscore a negative view of the creole speaker.

On the other hand, there is evidence within the texts that creole can also be used in a positive sense to indicate affection and it is in this an attempt at transformation is made. In *Hand in Hand*, creole terms of endearment appear. Khadija’s sister is known at her workplace as “choonks” which is a creole term for describing her pleasantly plump size. The close relationship between Giselle and her mother in *Sun Valley Romance*, is indicated by the creole “mammie” which contrasts with the more formal Standard English, “Mommy”. This novel is distinct in being the only text which projects a role for creole in the characterization of the female protagonist. For instance, when she playfully accuses the male protagonist, Gary, of trying to fool her, she tells him in creole, “Don’t come with that...” (73). There are also instances of local sexual puns on Standard English terms, such as when Giselle’s brother Garnet, tells her that she must make sure that Gary is not “cocksure” of her. Giselle chides him for his crudeness. Creole orality also breaks through the Standard English of the text in references to local proverbs such as “Those who can’t hear will feel” (*Heartaches* 83) and despite the attempt to anglicize it, in “Every skin teet’ ain’t a laugh” (*Merchant* 11). Manipulating point of view, using creole for the purposes of characterization are examples of strategies used within the text to inject an indigenous perspective.

What then are the implications of using the conventional, inherited genre of the popular romance to express a Caribbean reality especially taking into consideration that the series did not turn out to be a commercial success and was eventually discontinued? The series is significant in its attempt to address stereotypes concerning black characterization, black love and relationships in a genre or forum frequently read by women and more importantly young girls. Bryce points to the significance of *Merchant of Dreams* for example, in raising the issue of the ‘self-realization’ of the heroine and makes links to the romance fiction coming out of Nigeria where “self-realization is envisaged, not only as marriage to the ideal man, but much more importantly as the heroine’s achievement of something for herself, in terms of professional or business success. It points towards a different conceptualization of the heroine function which privileges autonomy and pragmatism” (“World” 22). This revisioning also calls for changes in male behavior, thus as noted previously, Andel in *Fantasy of Love* gives up his medical career in London in order to stay near to Khadija who refuses to leave the West Indies.

The significance of the Caribbean Caresses Series lies in its attempt to challenge the status quo, to change the image of the Caribbean woman and to explore and extend here relationship with the Caribbean man – historically a site of tension and misunderstanding. The extent of the success of this endeavour cannot only be measured by the paucity of financial return. It has paved the way for other writers to explore the potential of the romance to imagine social change. Meehan writes of the frame of the romance being one of the “primary narrative forms through which Haitian writers and politicians have chosen to tell their stories of national identity... the romance

potentially helps consolidate national communities still emerging from anti-colonial battles and civil war” (106-107). He points to the work of Edwidge Danticat as one in whose writing it is the imperial or western world that exists on the periphery of the romance, and romance becomes symbolic of a nationalistic love for one’s heritage, as well as love for one’s mate. In her short story, “Caroline’s Wedding”, for example, she merges the two, to give a unique perspective of the influence of Haitian politics on the prospective marriage of a young Haitian-American woman. In the narration of the story, sections about the romance between Caroline and Eric are interspersed with sections that address the political or social realities of Haitians living in a foreign country.

Other Caribbean writers have taken up the challenge of indigenizing the popular romance. Roslyn Carrington, a Trinidadian writer for Arabesque writing under the pseudonym Simona Taylor, in *Night Heat* attempts to incorporate a concern for the Caribbean environment alongside the romance of the main protagonists. Valerie Belgrave in *Tigress*, achieves a more natural sounding female protagonist in terms of Caribbean speech. The male protagonist in this text is an environmentalist bent on saving the north coast of Trinidad from avaricious developers. This is a clear extra textual reference to Trinidad and Tobago, where the government struggles between industrial development that will bring in financial returns and the preservation of the fragile ecological balance along the north coast.

The contemporary Caribbean-centred romance highlights efforts of writers to grapple with the politics of representation. The presentation of the Caribbean protagonist as beautiful is an intimate aspect of the region’s thrust to redefine itself in relation to the West, as regards the issue of black inferiority. It nevertheless reveals an ambivalence about who we are, about our language, where we live and our place in the world. Yet in order to change the images of ourselves as a colonized people, we must begin by revisioning ourselves beyond the stereotypes imposed by those who have held civil authority over us and continue trying to define us.

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