

**AN EXAMINATION OF MULTICULTURALISM AND RACISM IN EDGAR
MITTELHOLZER'S *A MORNING AT THE OFFICE***

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines Mittelholzer's depiction of the multicultural and multiracial character of the West Indies in his novel, A Morning at the Office. It unfolds that the West Indies is inhabited by various peoples, from different parts of the globe and who had no indigenous link or ancestral claim on the islands. The paper further traces the roots of this multiculturalism in the West Indies and how it has engendered racism to the various colonial ideological onslaughts on the Islands, the importation of millions of African captives as well as the presence of Chinese and East Indians who served as planters and overseers on the newly established mines and plantation. Indeed, it is this conglomerate of peoples with diverse cultures that has made the Islands to be described as "A Stew Pot". It is the submission of this paper that in a multicultural society, the issues of racism and racial segregation abound. The paper particularly uses Edgar Mittelholzer's A Morning at the Office to project this view. At the end it asserts that the West Indies can only maintain its genuine national identity if all racial barriers are removed and the various races learn to appreciate the cultural and racial diversities of the Islands without prejudice to skin pigmentation.*

KEYWORDS: Multiculturalism, Racism, Stew Pot, Identity

INTRODUCTION

We are a heterogeneous society, a rich cultural stew, where the various ingredients-white potatoes, brown meat, yellow squash, red tomatoes, and all the other substances-while maintaining their distinctiveness, have contributed their unique cultural juices and ethnic flavors, all richly blended by the heat of group tension. (Caleb Rosado, 1977:15).

From the above Rosado sees "A Stew Pot" as a better metaphor to describe the reality of America as a multicultural society. This metaphor can be used to describe not only the American society but indeed all multicultural societies and especially the West Indies. More than any other region of the world, the West Indies has been inhabited by different peoples from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds. The Islands have been influenced in one way or the other by contact with almost all the continents of the world. This paper examines multiculturalism in the Caribbean and how it has given rise to the racial tendencies in the islands. It further reveals from the text the various racial groups in the Caribbean and how they struggle to relate with one another.

Background of the West Indies

Since Christopher Columbus first landed on the Caribbean Islands in 1492 as an agent of the Spanish monarch, the region's history was altered. The original inhabitants of the Islands were the Arawaks, the Caribs and the Ciboneys who were engaged in agriculture, seafaring and hunting. The Spanish government established the first European settlement in Hispaniola in 1493 and their main aim was for the mining of gold and other precious metals. They wanted to use the original inhabitants as cheap labour on the mines. This was met with stiff resistance by the natives and this led to their being almost completely annihilated. Those who survived the European brutality either fled or were deported to other places. The Europeans were therefore left with no other option than to look for external source of labour. This coincided with the transatlantic slave trade that provided the opportunity for them to massively import African captives to the Caribbean to work on the mines and plantations. According to Gerald Moore (x) the Atlantic slave trade forcibly transported at least twenty million human beings from Africa to the Americas and endured for some three and a half centuries.

However, with the gradual decline of Spain as the pioneering European colonial power, the Caribbean became the principal object for intense rivalry among European powers such as Britain, France, Denmark and the United States. Safra et al (1998) quoted in Akuso (7-8) further elaborate on the stages of Caribbean colonization. The first stage of English penetration of the Spanish and Caribbean Empire was undertaken by privateers who carried out armed raids on Spanish possessions between 1536 and 1609. In the second stage, colonies were founded in the Lesser Antilles, an area that had not been settled by the Spaniards. Between 1630 and 1640 the Dutch claimed Curacao, Aruba, Bonaire, the British on the other hand, claimed Barbados, Nevis, Antigua, and Montserrat, the French claimed Martinique and Guadeloupe. Each nation tried to keep its colonies from trading with any other country and between 1697 and 1814 there were numerous conflicts between the United Kingdom and France about Caribbean possessions.

The involvement of the United States in the West Indies which began with the occupation of Cuba and Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War (1898), grew in scope during the twentieth century. The United States bought the Danish Virgin Islands from the Danes in 1917 and occupied Haiti (1915-35) and Dominican Republic (1916-22). They also established United States military bases in the Caribbean in order to protect western interests and their involvement opportunities during the World War II.

Lichtenstein (4) asserts that the European settlers proceeded to suck the life out of it (the Islands). Haven devoured the indigenous meat; they sought to refill the shell, to make the West Indies after a fashion into a wealth generating thing. The manner in which the European colonizers scrambled and carved out territories for themselves remained indeed the dominating event in a series of movements in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This brought in the Caribbean under European colonial rule; it was a place for struggles for economic monopoly, material gain and political subjugation. There were also on these Islands the East Indians, Chinese and Portuguese

and others whose ancestry came from what is now India and Pakistan who were settling down and working as overseers and planters in these plantations.

Sherlock (37) argues that in terms of number, Africa took possession of the West Indies in the eighteenth century. Other racial groups are unimportant. The two chief elements only in population are brown and the blacks and the blacks is the predominant. In Jamaica just over 17% of the population are coloured, 78% are blacks. In Antique, Sherlock stated that 12% are coloured and 85% blacks. In St Kitts 85% are blacks. In Montserrat, 92% of the population is black and 8% coloured. This factor has made the population of these islands to have a characteristically wide range of pigmentation based in the intermingling of the blacks, coloured and whites, but the blacks being the predominant.

It is because of this that Sherlock further posits that the Caribbean presents a diversity of race and culture brought about by their metropolitan affiliation with different European powers and the massive importation of Africans and people from India. In spite of this diversity, each of these islands presents a very similar configuration having been moulded by the same historical forces. George Lamming (1) concurs when he says that: The Islands are a cocoon of confusion. First a population composed entirely of emigrants' i.e. people, slaves or otherwise who had no indigenous link, no ancestral claim on the soil which was to become their new home, a diversity of people organized by different European powers, contending in a scramble for supremacy over them.

As the African slaves were transported from Africa to the Caribbean, they held on their links to their motherland through their traditions which encompass oral art forms ranging from myths and legends to folktales. They also carried along with them their speech patterns. These they merged with the already existing traditions of the surviving Caribs and the settled European natives. A new way of life was therefore forged, distinct and peculiar to the Caribbean Islands. Ade lending his own voice on this asserts that:

In spite of the obvious disadvantage of being uprooted from their homeland and the machinations of slave masters, the Africans have maintained their culture, but this culture has naturally not been static. Haven evolved over the years, certain elements have been kept and others modified (35).

African culture and languages such as Fala, Mondor Po, Bambara, Yoruba, Calabar, Bentu etc., have made an indelible mark on the culture of the West Indies, and in effect their literature. It is within this multicultural situation that the Caribbean society has emerged. The cultural and social lives of the island are very complex with each racial group having its own distinctive culture and beliefs. The Caribbean is made up of a culture combining European, African, American and Asian influences. The culture of the Caribbean is therefore a fusion of all divergent cultures of the people who today make up the population of the region. It is this multicultural and multi-racial situation that pervades the Caribbean society that this paper seeks to examine in Mittelholzer's *A Morning at the Office*.

MULTICULTURALISM

Multiculturalism is a term that has to do with the diversity of culture within a particular society and all those policies that encourage or promote this diversity. Caleb Rosado (2) defines multiculturalism as a “system”, a set of interrelated parts-in this case beliefs and behaviours- which make up the whole of how humans experience today’s world. It includes what people believe about others, their basic paradigms, and how these impact, and are impacted by, behaviour (3). Blauner Robert quoted in Rosado (4-5) on the other hand, states that multiculturalism enables us to look upon the Other, especially the Other that society has taught us to regard with distrust and suspicion and to be taken advantage of, not as a “potential predator, but as a profitable partner”.

RACISM

The Anti-Defamation League declares that racism is the belief that a particular race is superior or inferior to another, that a person’s social and moral traits are predetermined by his or her inborn biological characteristics. It is the hatred of one person by another-or the belief that another person is less than human because of skin colour, language, customs, and place of birth or any factor that supposedly reveals the basic nature of that person (1). Racism therefore, is a form of prejudice based on perceived physical differences. It is manifested by the unfavourable or hostile attitudes towards people belonging to another race. According to Wikipedia (1) racism consists of both prejudices and discrimination based in social perceptions of biological differences between people. It often takes the form of social actions, practices or beliefs, or political systems that consider races to be ranked as inherently superior or inferior to each other, based on presumed shared inheritable traits, abilities, or qualities. It may also hold that members of different races should be treated differently.

In the Caribbean multiculturalism and racism was brought about by the contact between Europe and the Americas in the late 15th century with the voyages of Italian-Spanish-navigator Christopher Columbus. Columbus describes the original inhabitants of the islands of the Caribbean as people with olive-to copper skin, thick straight and long black hair; and short, muscular bodies. They had the habits of going largely unclothed and bathing frequently. He also described their types of body adornment including paints, gold piercings, and tattoos. The Europeans justified the domination of the Native Americans based in large part on notions of European racial superiority. They came to believe that what they saw as bizarre and exotic customs were somehow directly related to differences in skin colour and texture, and body and face shape. Thus the concept of race developed to include both physical and cultural differences among people (Encarta 7).

Multiculturalism and racism in *A Morning at the Office*

Edgar Austin Mittelholzer was born on the 4th of December, 1909. He was a Guyanese novelist, the earliest from the West Indies region to establish himself in Europe and gain a significant European readership. His novels explore situations from a variety of places within the Caribbean and range in time from the early period of European settlement to the twentieth century. They feature a cross section of ethnic groups and social classes, dealing with subjects of historical,

political, psychological and moral interests. (Hughes (89-91)). *A Morning at the Office* is set in Trinidad. According to Eriksen, Trinidad is a poly-ethnic Island in the Southern Caribbean with a population of slightly over a million, forming an independent republic with lesser neighbouring Island, Tobago “discovered” by Columbus in his third journey in 1498 and subsequently settled by slaves, administrators and indentured labourers from Africa, Europe and India respectively. Trinidad does not represent that kind of society so to speak; known to the non-Caribbean world primarily for its limbo dancing, its calypso music and its annual carnival. Trinidad is in fact a very well integrated part of the modern world in many regards (169). In *A Morning at the Office* (1950), Mittelholzer captures the multicultural and racial nature of the Caribbean society. He presents a society that is inhabited by different races with different cultural backgrounds. Each of the characters in the novel represents the divergent cultures in the Caribbean Islands. For example, Horace Xavier, the office boy, is a negro, Mary Barber, the sweeper, is a negress, Mr. Jagabir, the office’s Assistant Accountant is an East Indian, Mr. Murrain and George Waley (the office bosses) are both English men, Miss Henery and Mrs Hinckson belong to the coloured middle class and Miss Ven Tip is a Chinese. Each of these coloured (mulatto) members of the office have a mixture of black blood and either French, German, Spanish and English.

Previous readings of *A Morning at the Office* have focused on its satiric renditions of life forms, relationships, identity and survival. They haven’t related these forms to the inherent blockage that racism, domination and exploitation have imposed on the “Stew Pot”. This paper analyses the text from the perspective of the tension between multiculturalism and racism which today accounts for the fragmentation and conflicts of the Caribbean. Multiculturalism deals with diversity and fusion but racism obliterates this process, thus rendering the society factious and underdeveloped. What Mittelholzer has done in this novel is to underscore the tension and bifurcation contingent on the binary fusion (multiculturalism) and fragmentation (racism). This bifurcation has serious implications for national integration

Michael Gilkes in Bruce King (ed) (104) asserts that *A Morning at the Office* is an uninspiringly honest and penetrating appraisal of a typically hierarchical, colour-based, colonial society. The “Office” itself is a microcosm of the West Indies, whose formal pattern of racial and social degree is reflected in the way the multiracial staff is organized; the white manager at one end, insulated by the frosted glass door of his private office, the black messenger at the other, separated by a wooden barrier from the central area with its coloured, East Indian, Chinese, French and Spanish creole workers. This compact framework, structural as well as symbolic, reflects the author’s tight control and deliberately objective view of his material within a precise time-scheme (6.56am to noon of one morning).

According to Cartey (97)) *A Morning at the Office* is not only constructed with racial, class and colour frames but heed together to be a political and religious construct-indeed all its myriad societal underpinnings of the period came to play... *A Morning at the Office* is really the elaborate presentation of the social history of Trinidad and Tobago and to some extent the entire Caribbean before independence. Here “races and all the bleedings of race have miscegenation and all the result of miscegenation, have too illegitimacy and its entire pervasiveness- mall blend together, a warped intricate societal mosaic”.

Mittelholzer uses fourteen characters in an office each representing the various races and cultures found in Trinidad and the social patterning of the Caribbean society of the 1940s. The multicultural situation has resulted in racism as one race wants to lord it over the others. During (195) supports this view thus:

Once a society is recognized as being heterogeneous and in particular multinational then central institutions cart-funding bodies, universities, state portray and advisory committees, professional associations even board of large corporations begin to choose representatives from minority communities to help in the work of administration.

This informs the frustration of Horace Xavier. He is portrayed as very ambitious, intelligent, and hardworking, but all his aspirations are depicted as close to unattainable because he is black. At eight, Xavier expressed his desire to become a medical doctor to his mother but her response shocked him out of his dream. His mother says: “ah know you would mek a good doctor, me boy. You got it in you. But dat not for you, Horace. Your skin black and you poor (7). Horace however, is never discouraged; first he gets employed as a messenger, later as an office boy, and in the beginning of the novel, we see him as the new holder of the office key. Horace felt that the bestowal upon him of this new duty represented “an upward step” (5). Thus he goes further to educate himself in typing, shorthand, and reading. Unfortunately as Mr. Benson, the Chief clerk observes, Horace “would get on...but socially he will never get far”, the reason being that “his black skin will always hold him back (169).

Blauner (112) argues that racism is the propensity to categorize people who are culturally different in terms of non-cultural traits for example skin-colour, hair structure or face and eye. Racism rejects the definition of people by themselves and constitutes one based on the framework of the oppressor. Indeed, it is because of this that Xavier’s secret love for the Manager’s secretary is frustrated by his skin colour. He knows that there is a wall of barrier between them. The racial difference between them is expressed thus:

It was true that she was charming and attractive-physically as well as in manner- but he should have remembered that he was only a black boy, whereas she was a coloured lady of good family. His complexion was dark brown; hers was a pale olive. His hair was kinky; hers was full of large waves and gleaming. He was a poor boy with hardly an education, the son of a cook; she well off and of good education and good breeding. He was low-class; she was middle-class (9).

This racial prejudice is also seen in the life of Mr. Murrain. He considers it quite unbecoming and demeaning for a white man to befriend a coloured. He could therefore not declare his inner love for Miss Henery. He disqualifies her by saying that:

Miss Henery was an olive skinned girl with kinky highroad hair artificially straightened, her features were more European than negroid, it was true and she was pretty. But the fact remained that he was a white man; English man...(153).

In *A Morning at the Office*, Mr. Murrain, a Whiteman who is supposed to be the Chief Accountant confesses to a white boy, Sidney Whitmer that he doesn't know a thing about accountancy, and so the job goes to Mr Jagabir, while he virtually does nothing and earns the largest salary just because he is a Whiteman. Also Sidney Whitmer celebrating his skin colour confesses that "in England I was a nobody but the instant I arrived here my white skin alone was sufficient to give me entry into the best circles" (26).

Mr Jagabir, the assistant Accountant and an East Indian, is another man used by Mittelholzer to depict racial tendencies in the novel. His previous position as a labourer where he 'had been cursed and humiliated by a white overseer' has put a lasting fear in him. He is being haunted by the fear of losing his job:

He made it his business to be well informed concerning everything that went on in the office. His ears were perpetually on the alert, for the fear was always with him, that, despite his efficiency as a book keeper, he would one day be thrown out. He had been brought up to feel that an East Indian's place was in the field...shoveling and weeding. An office was meant for white people and good class coloured people (22).

Mittelholzer reflects how Mr.Jagabir suffered in the hands of the whites thus: "He had worked in the field four years after primary school. He had been humiliated by white overseers. In Tucurapo office he had suffered insult and scolding in silence (32)

A Morning at the Office therefore presents a society where the racial order of the dominant group, which think itself as distinct and superior raises its social position by exploiting, controlling and keeping down others who are categorized in racial or ethnic terms when once more groups are excluded from equal participation in the society and from their share of its values, others not excluded and dominated are correspondingly elevated in position (Blauner 1972:22). The whites or Europeans did not consider the blacks as human or as possessing any kind of culture. In the words of Nana-Tagoa (15) "the blacks were not seen as a force in history, being neither makers nor creators of history". Sandhu also states that "literacy was an index of human being human. If you could not read nor write, you weren't human and if you weren't human, it became very easy to treat black people as brutes and cattle".

In *A Morning at the Office*, Mr Murrain, a Whiteman who is supposed to be the chief accountant confesses to a white boy, Sidney Whitmer that he didn't that he doesn't know a thing about accountancy, and so the job goes to MrJagabir, while he virtually does nothing and earns the largest salary just because he is a Whiteman. He earns three hundred and sixty dollars a month, while the hardworking Jagabir receives only a hundred and twenty dollars a month. Even the coloured are not spared from this racial segregation. Mr.Reynolds, who was getting ten cents commission on every case of grape fruit juice he sold as an agent, pushed up the sales to the point that he was soon earning an income almost equal to Mr Murrain's salary. Mr.Murrain uncomfortable with this ordered Mr Waley to cut down the commission to enhance his superiority. Also Sidney Whitmer celebrating his skin colour says "In England I was a nobody but the instant I arrived here my white skin alone was sufficient to give me entry into the best circles" (26).

Apart from this racial segregation in terms of job and wages, Mittelholzer also uses the dwelling places of the different races to show this divide. The blacks and low class in society dwell in a slum area where the houses are more of shacks with “leaking roofs”. Mary Barker for example, after sweeping the office would ‘trudge more than a mile to the two-roomed hovel on Gozalez Hill which was her home’ (17). This contrasts with the habitation of people such as Mr. Murrain, the white Chief Accountant of Essential Products, who live in Maravel District which is described as “a picturesque valley district more favoured by the elites just outside the city of Port of Spain” (40).

Racism is also expressed in terms of language use. Different languages are used by different people according to their social class. For example Queens English is the language of the whites, those of mixed heritage and a few privileged blacks. Creole is a national language which came about by the blending of the various colonial languages to form a unique blend peculiar to the Caribbean. Horace, Mary Barker and other blacks all use Creole as they could not converse in good English. Through descriptions of the character’s speech, from rural Trinidadian Creole to Queen’s English, Mittelholzer gives us abundant information about cultural and racial differences that exist in the Caribbean.

Racial prejudice is seen even within the social circle. The clubs admit people only according to their race. For instance, the criteria for membership were based on skin colour-pink or shallow complexion as well as the colour of the hair. While the Poui Club is exclusively for members within a certain range of shades, beginning from shallow and ending at very high brown. Hair should be small waves but not outright kinky. Blacks are not admitted in this Club. The Belmonter’s Club is for the pure Negroes (blacks) of socially-rising civil servants. In the “Office” the employment is based on skin colour. Race determines the kind of job one gets and the kind of friend one keeps in the society. MrMurrain for example frowns at Sidney Whitmer’s relationship with other races.

CONCLUSION

In *A Morning at the Office*, Edgar Mittelholzer has examined the predominant issues that defined Trinidad nay the West Indies of the 1940s. The multicultural and multiracial nature of the community is brought into fore. The Islands are also stratified into classes such as the upper, middle and lower class. The Blacks are at the bottom of the ladder and such the most exploited, oppressed and relegated. Through an office setting Mittelholzer has been able to delineate the barriers and walls erected by colour and class prejudices. An atmosphere of fear, anxiety and distrust permeate the society. Skin colour has become the parameter for measuring the worth of an individual in society. Multiculturalism has engendered racism which in turn has created divisions, conflicts and the underdevelopment of the West Indies. The West Indies can therefore be described as “A Stew Pot” with various ingredients (several cultures and races) which is over heated by the fire of racism. Mittelholzer desires a society free from racism and wonders “why did men have to be different races? Why not one complexion...one big nation?”(157). His ideal society is one

which all the races can live together without one dominating or lording it over the other because of his skin-colour.

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