



Jamaican History and the Language of Freedom in selected novels of Vic Reid

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Abstract

This is historicism of selected novels of a foremost, and indeed, pioneer West Indian writer, Vic Reid, offering an insight into the writer's seminal contribution to West Indian collective sensibility on the concept of Freedom, and how it defines and determines Vic Reid's organising motif, his critical and artistic sensibilities, through his peculiar use of language. New Historicism was deployed for textual analytical purpose, and significantly, to draw attention to the historical significance of Reid's concerted efforts at weaving, consciously, the motif of collective freedom into the national psyche through the purposively selected novels, as well as getting the collective consciousness transformed and integrated into the emergent Jamaican cultural subsoil.

Keywords: Jamaican History, Language, Freedom, Historicism, Vic Reid

Introduction

Victor Stafford Reid (also known as Vic Reid) was one of the writers to emerge from the new literary and nationalist movement that seized Jamaican sentiment in the period of the late 1930s. Critics have stated that his work is the earliest statement of the discovery of a West Indian consciousness. Vic Reid can be classified as a writer of the Postcolonial period. He was the author of eight novels, three of which were written specifically for children; plays, and several short stories. Three of his most notable works are *New Day*, the first West Indian novel to be written in Jamaican dialect, *The Leopard* which gained international repute and the biography of Jamaica's late foremost and National Hero Norman Washington Manley *The Horses of the Morning*. As a writer, he aimed to instill an awareness of legacy and tradition among the Jamaican people. His writings reflect many of the social and cultural hardships that pervaded the periods illustrated in his works. His works are motivated by the history, hopes, and powers of the Jamaican people, hence, projecting thematic issues on the freedom of black culture and describing the struggles of black people. Subjects on violence and cultural confrontation are also recurrent in his works.

Studies have revealed that the modern history of the Americans actually begins with the modern history of the Caribbean. From the time Europeans ventured into the so-called 'New World' in the late fifteenth century, the Caribbean has played a most important role in the unfolding of events that would subsequently shake the entire foundation of the world. The meeting of Africans, Europeans, and the indigenous people in the Caribbean is arguably one of the most interesting and important aspects of world history. It was in this region that one could perceive the worst aspects of inhumanity juxtaposed with a story of survival and triumph of the human spirit. As Caribbean history unfolds, it reveals itself as a continuing saga of wars of various types, conquest of different sorts, and above all, resistance.

Soon after their advent in the fifteenth century, Europeans destroyed the civilisations they met on ground, created by the indigenous Carib, Arawak, and Ciboney. They brought oppressed Europeans to serve as their indentured servants, in addition to the millions of enslaved Africans. Caribbean people are now mainly African, with a minority of whites and East Asians. Most of the latter arrived from India after the abolition of slavery to replace the black workers, many of whom had left the plantations. By the twentieth century Caribbean society was mostly Creole. This term, in this context, refers to the new civilisation based on African, Asian, and European culture. This rich medley is the dominant characteristic of the contemporary Caribbean.

As a writer, Victor Stafford Reid (Vic Reid) aimed to instill an awareness of legacy and tradition among the Jamaican people. His writings reflect many of the social and cultural hardships that pervaded the periods illustrated in his works. Literary critic Edward Baugh states, "Reid's writing showed a fondness for the rebel with a cause... he wanted people to learn about their heritage through his writing". Reid himself confirms this in an interview conducted with Daryl Cumber Dance when he states;

Above all, 'twas the need to... remind the Jamaicans who they are, where they came from, to show them that the then self government we were aiming for, the then-change in the Constitution that we were getting was not entirely a gift. The fact is that historically we had paid for it, and we had been paying for over three hundred years... and therefore they should accept it with pride and work at it with knowledge that it is theirs as a right. (379)

Throughout his career, Vic Reid wrote with the goal of helping Jamaicans, particularly young Jamaicans, to know themselves through an awareness of their history and culture to help them to develop a sense of pride. Even today, Reid's work is still influential and has been appreciated both locally and internationally. In this study, therefore, new historicism shall be deployed for the textual analysis of the purposively selected novels of Vic Reid to distill the author's re-presentation of the Jamaican history and language of freedom.

The New Historicism Approach

New Historicism as a critical movement commenced in 1980 as a result of the critical manifesto delivered by Stephen Greenblatt which later informed the coinage of the term "New Historicism". His intention was to establish new ways to the approach of interpreting Renaissance literary texts. Hence, we discover the recurrence of this term in his treatise titled *The Power of Forms and the Forms of Power in the Renaissance*. In the 1980s, literary studies challenged the literary assumptions of "Practical Criticism" or New Criticism as proposed by F.R. Leavis, I.A Richards and a host of other critical scholars. These critics interpreted texts within the sphere of literary and moral traditions, detaching the link of critical evaluation from the social, political and historical spheres. However, New Historicists have been able to illustrate how underlying discourses in a text could be successfully projected to limelight. Mukesh (2007) opines that:

The new historicists acquired this new understanding by directing the methodologies and procedures of deconstruction, feminism and post-structuralism to literature and literary texts. The political and cultural slant that this method gave to the interpretation of literature once again energized departments of English and encouraged literary studies to reestablish a link with the political and social world that gave rise to it. (115)

Subsequently, critical records attest to the fact that there had been several critical theories and movements in the twentieth century. These movements did not just spring up, but came in a sequel. Examples of these are new criticism, formalism, structuralism and deconstruction which are premised more on linguistic aspects of a literary piece. Ryan (1999) explains that "New criticism emerged as a revolt against historical and biographical approaches to literature by turning the readership from history to text with a notion of close textual analysis" (128). Likewise, Das (2000) projects the fact that formalism's approach is close to that of New Criticism. It also sought to cultivate the canon of artistic technique at the expense of content and propounded that form is to be emphasised as chief criterion (and that formalism and new criticism) were concerned with the text as an autonomous entity" (169).

In the wake of the revisionist historiography which was generated by the New Historicists in the United States, there was an immense change that occurred as regards interpreting literary texts. This change influenced literary critics' approach to delineating literary texts. They employed what Kar (1995) regards to as "thick description" (75) which was borrowed from history and philosophy. This approach suggests the inter-relatedness of history and literature. New historicism, at the outset, focused on the Renaissance texts. Hence, it has been widened in scope in the split of time. This theory has made useful contribution to the development of post-colonial and multi-ethnic discourses from the Third World and developing nations (Sharma, 2014:7).

New Historicism is a critical approach that interrupts the extreme forms of some strictly formal and linguistic approaches that employ close textual analysis. This theory lays emphasis on the signification process of literary texts in order to realise their aesthetic value. This is because texts are generally believed as being a maximum reality to the readers. The opinions of New Historicists center on realising mainly the linguistic and textual features of a literary work. The most fundamental concern of New Historicism is context. It is usually not easy to separate the text from the context since a text poses a context for another text. Therefore, context had to be redefined by Kar (1995) as “both determined by the contingencies of the text’s original moment of production and its displacement to a new location charged with fresh resonance” (81).

It has been explained by Sharma (2014), that “history cannot be accessed except in its textual form and this canon of textuality of history and historicity of text pulls down the line of demarcation between literary and non-literary text” (3). This is further explained in Ukkan (2004) that “New Historicism involves a parallel reading or juxtaposition of the literary and the non-literary text of the same historical period. Both are given equal importance and allowed to work as sources of information and interrogation with each other” (22-23). Since New Historicism is a convergence of history, culture, and ideology, it is found suitable for analysing the selected works of Vic Reid. This is to adequately distill the author’s re-presentation of the Jamaican history and language of freedom. Relevant previous studies have revealed that the modern history of the Americans actually begins with the modern history of the Caribbean. From the time Europeans ventured into the so-called ‘New World’ in the late fifteenth century, the Caribbean has played a most important role in the unfolding of events that would subsequently shake the entire foundation of the world. The meeting of Africans, Europeans, and the indigenous people in the Caribbean is arguably one of the most interesting and important aspects of world history. It was in this region that one could perceive the worst aspects of inhumanity juxtaposed with a story of survival and triumph of the human spirit. As Caribbean history unfolds, it reveals itself as a continuing saga of wars of various types, conquest of different sorts, and above all, resistance.

Vic Reid and the Caribbean Culture

It has been noted undoubtedly that Vic Reid celebrates and propagates the Jamaican culture and tradition in his works. This, in every sense, explains his thematic tendency of cultural confrontation. He advocates for the traditional language even within the educational sector of the Jamaicans. Thus, the undaunted spirit of the Caribbean remains highly visible in its popular culture. Writers including Vic Reid used the day-to-day oppression of enslavement and colonialism as instruments for creativity in the art, music, and literature for which the region is known. Caribbean writers are recognised at home and abroad. In 1995 Derek Walcott of St. Lucia won the Nobel Prize for Literature. The Caribbean literary world is also familiar with the works of C. L. R. James and V. S. Naipaul (Trinidad), Claude McKay (Jamaica), Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua), Maryse Condé (Guadeloupe), Kamau Brathwaite (Barbados), and Edwidge

Danticat (Haiti), for example. Many of these writers live abroad for at least some of the time, but their works are read and studied in the Caribbean.

Even more than its literature, Caribbean music has had a major impact on society at home and abroad. This is also replete in Vic Reid's writings. The Rastafarian movement, started in Jamaica in the 1930s, is closely associated with reggae. The songs of Bob Marley and the Wailers, Eric Clapton, Peter Tosh, Beres Hammond, Freddie McGregor, and others are known in all parts of the world and have revolutionised the world music. In the southern and eastern Caribbean calypso and soca have helped to popularise West Indian carnival. Caribbean people carried their carnival celebration with them when they migrated. The Labor Day Carnival in Brooklyn, the Notting Hill Carnival in England, and the Caribana Festival in Toronto have contributed to the profile of Caribbean people in migration.

It is worth noting that Caribbean leaders also recognise that the Caribbean community is more than the people who live on the islands. It is for this reason that major decisions taking place in the region usually include the voice of the Caribbean Diaspora. This is also replete in the works of Vic Reid as he portrays every form of migration with his characters. Emigration has been a response to economic problems since the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century has seen the exodus of Caribbean people to Europe (especially England), the United States, and Canada. Haitians, who first migrated to France and francophone Africa, have increasingly chosen the United States and Canada, too.

Late-twentieth-century Caribbean migration to the United States resulted from changing migration laws in this society. Before 1965, the United States had openly discriminated against some nationalities. The Immigration Act of 1965 ushered in a less discriminatory approach, moving away from the preference given to northwestern Europeans. The newly independent countries of the Caribbean sent thousands of their nationals to earn a living and create lives in America. Today, Caribbean immigrants live in large numbers in cities such as New York, Miami, Boston, and Philadelphia.

Caribbean societies face dangers from globalisation. The Caribbean lies between South and North America, where illicit drugs, especially cocaine, are produced and consumed. The cash-strapped governments of the Caribbean cannot compete with the finances available to major drug dealers, but they are forced to take from their limited resources to rid their waters and lands of the corruption, violence, and wasted lives resulting from drug dealing and consumption.

Highlights of Reid's Themes

The literary themes portrayed in Reid's writings focus on black culture and the description of the freedom struggles of black people. His works focus primarily on the history, hopes, and powers of the Jamaican people. Thus, issues about violence and cultural confrontation are also recurrent in his works. Reid wants to break apart the distortions of history portrayed by the foreign press, which

described Jamaican radicals as criminals. His work is designed not only to record experiences but also to renew his countrymen's awareness of their own unique identity. In essence, Reid's novels focus on the freedom of black culture and describe the struggles of black people. He wrote to prove the innocence of people who were rendered to be the opposite. Reid held that he must discover, somehow, that these people were not the criminals they were thought to be. In a way, he was telling the untold stories of the times. His first novel, *New Day* (1949), reconstructs the history of Jamaica, as narrated by 87-year-old John Campbell, from his childhood days, until Jamaica gained independence from Britain. It takes us back to the Morant Bay Rebellion (1865), and brings us forward to the first general elections in Jamaica (1944). What is remarkable about the novel is that it was written in the Jamaican vernacular (Patois). According to Dance (1911), Reid's stated aim was to:

Transfer to paper some of the beauty, kindliness and humor of my people, weaving characters into the wider framework of these eighty years and creating a tale that will offer as true an impression as fiction can of the way by which Jamaica and its people came today (379).

Critics have hailed *New Day* as a landmark in West Indian Literature. Gerald Moore has called it "the first announcement of the discovery of the West Indian that (he) is neither a rootless being devoid of identity, nor a lost son of Africa or Asia, but a man made and shaped by this island now". Mervyn Morris describes *New Day* as "a dialect work with a sense of national mission, part and parcel of a period of national awakening in the arts as in politics" (Griffiths 113). Vic-Reid's second novel, *The Leopard*, set outside of Jamaica, was motivated by the need to give more balance to history as well as sheer anger. Reid stated that he was angry because the Western press and writers were treating the Mau Mau of Kenya as if they were not human beings and as if they were sheer animals.

The Leopard focuses on the controversies of human nature with respect to the coexistence of violence and hatred between Africans and Europeans. It highlights the half Kikuyu, half -Masai boy, Nebu who hunts down and kills his white employer in the forest of Kenya. Wounded, he is in turn hunted down by a Leopard. It is a case of the hunter and the hunted. However, what is significant about this novel is that it marks a shift from Reid's earlier concerns of illustrating struggles in Jamaica to illustrating a symbolic similarity in Africa. In addition, it was written so convincingly by someone who had until then never visited Africa.

We also discover several acts of violence that are either presented dramatically or reported. There is an instance of the massacre of Lomas family where Nebu silences "a black servant with a thrust of his spear." Then there is the horrifying screaming of the European policeman, a castration expert, suffering unspeakable tortures before being killed by the Wakamba women. Then Bwana Gibson batters to death "the flower face of his msabu" because she has given birth to half-caste child. There is Gibson's own death from Nebu's panga and the leopard's almost casual slaying of the half-caste boy. Finally, we have the white

lieutenant's shooting of the leopard and his own death in the climax of the story. In his final scene, the lieutenant is about to shoot the already dying but armed Nebu:

He raised the gun and considered firing into the black just to make sure, then he recalled that they both seemed to have been travelling together. This must have been one of the loyal bucks, perhaps had saved the child from a massacre. He dropped his arm and walked forward. He stood out hard against the light from the door, a lean waisted, wide shouldered tawny bull leopard. And Nebu charted the curvature of his chest through the khaki bush jacket and marked where the breast bone swelled above the heart and the certainty that he had the target well laid flowed sweetly through him. Great One, the African sang in his head, give us long knives. It was morning in his arms and shoulders. (108)

The background was a war, not basically racial. In the end, it was economic and the urgent necessity that Nebu had to make the white man beautiful with death is the necessity to repossess the vast areas of the finest farming land in Kenya. When word of mouth failed them, the only option they are left with is naked force.

The Jamaicans reveals Reid's intentions and his reason for writing. This is to have black people proud of themselves and their history. It focuses on a band of escaped slaves who, under the leadership of Juan de Bola, established a mountain stronghold. They reached an understanding with the Spaniards under which they were allowed to remain in their mountain stronghold in return for not raiding the Spaniards. It depicts the Maroons as models of black dignity, grace and ability.

Another aspect of Reid's writing included his desire to contribute to the education system. Previously, schools were solely taught from an English perspective and through a colonial lens. Reid, however, wanted people in school to learn about their own heritage through his writing. He wanted people to recognise that blacks contributed to the shaping of Jamaica's history. In addition, his aim was to help young Jamaicans know themselves through an awareness of their history. In keeping with this, Reid wrote three novels especially for young readers, *The Young Warriors*, *Sixty-five*, and *Peter of Mount Ephraim*.

The novel, *The Young Warriors*, deals with the journey of five Maroon boys who pass tests of skill and endurance to become warriors in their village. When they go out hunting to celebrate, they suddenly discover that the forest is full of their enemies, the English Redcoat soldiers. What follows is a daring attempt by two of the boys, Tommy and Johnny, to seek aid from a neighbouring Maroon band to prevent the Redcoats from learning Mountain Top's location. In the encounter that follows, defeat seems certain but the young warriors help to bring about a great victory.

Sixty-five is based on the true story of the Morant Bay Rebellion, a rebellion made by the freed men of Jamaica, fighting against injustices such as poor wages and not being able to purchase land. Along with *Sixty five* and *The Young Warriors*, he wrote *Peter of Mount Ephraim* which focuses on the Sam Sharp slave rebellion of 1831. The significance of all three novels is that they highlight the struggles that Jamaican forefathers went through to gain freedom and independence.

Reid's final work was a biography of the Jamaican National Hero, the late Premier Norman Washington Manley, *The Horses of the Morning* (1985). It highlights the various chapters of the life of Norman Washington Manley. According to Rex Nettleford, "it was a human portrayal of a statesman and political visionary who was sensitive, decent and not without virtue in the old – fashioned sense of the word" (XVIII). This biography is significant as Vic Reid wrote about someone who shared his own views and purpose in life "the attainment of redemption and liberation as well as the awareness of one's culture and history". Reid's body of work also includes several stories, collected in *Fourteen Jamaican Short Stories* (1950), plays and lectures. Vic Reid's enduring theme of self-discovery; self-reliance and self-definition as well as his love for his country all played a significant role in his writings.

Reid's Technique and the Language of Freedom

It is important to draw attention to some of Reid's techniques, including, his use of the flashback technique and re-creation of African natural environment. As recorded in the *Daily Ghaner* (1948),

The quality of Mr. Reid's prose speaks for itself and so does the skill with which he handles the several layers of personality of his main character, as an old man, being again a boy and a young man, recounting past days while living through new ones. The flashback technique can be boring, but in Mr. Reid's hand it becomes a means of maintaining our interest on several planes at once.

The flashback technique is one that is replete in the works of Vic Reid. He uses this as a means to narrate his seemingly disjointed stories. This form is thereby imbibed to create awareness and recognition as regards the historical facts of the Caribbean, especially Jamaicans. An instance of this can be seen in *The Leopard*. It is textured with flashbacks and queer conversations between Nebu and his half-caste son and with the romanticised descriptions of African fauna and flora. Consequently, Nebu's act of adultery with his master's wife is key to the book's structure and Reid makes careful preparation for the scene. He stresses Nebu's agile strength and the young woman's athletic grace. The woman had a firm on horseback and a great deal of fluency in her walk. She was a very young wife for the half of his age.

In discussing Reid's language, his first novel, *New Day* is structured in the interest of readership and commercial viability. Reid crafted the language of his

narration as a merging of Jamaican dialect and Standard English. His intention for the novel is to transcend language barriers and to be understood by all literary audiences who could read English, while still retaining the beautiful rhythm of all the West Indian English-speaking people.

The novel is divided into three parts. The first part is written in the modified Jamaican dialect, Patois. However, the language of narration in the second part contains a diluted rendering of the same Jamaican vernacular. Finally, the third part is written entirely in traditional English. The use of nation dialect as the language of narration is evident in a passage taken from Reid's *New Day*;

Father stopped quick, his breath going with rush. Surprise there was on him, which made me wonder why; for Naomi and me knew well about Moses and my sis Ruthie. When we reached home, I asked Naomi why surprise should ha' taken Father, but she laughed and said all menfolk were fool-fool....But I am a-tell you of Father's voice that night. When he lifted his coco-macca stick and dropped it on Moses's shoulder, heard I heard in his voice all what I hear now as he shouts at my bro' Davie. (20)

Here, the repetition of "fool" and "heard" is employed for stylistic purposes of emphasis and rhythm, which both confer the dialect usage its distinctive and poetic character. The author's recurrent use of inversions such as "surprise there was on him" and elisions such as "ha" (to denote have) further operate as Reid's loose adaptations of Jamaican speech. Reid's reworking of Jamaican spoken word also manifests itself in the use of Jamaican adverbs such as "quick" in lieu of the Standard English adverb "quickly". Some critics have posited that Reid's use of Jamaican dialect may have derived from his passion for music and the desire to uphold a stately but natural rhythm in writing.

Another recurrent style in Reid's works is symbolism. Reid set his novel, *The Leopard*, in Africa instead of Jamaica to connect the struggles of the African people, which are the true origins of the black Jamaicans, to the oppression of the Jamaican people. Just like Kenneth Ramchand (1966) puts it, "The West Indian Negro is a descendent of the Africans, and more recently the idea of Africa has been a phase of West-Indian political thinking". (32)

In *The Leopard*, there is a point of contention that has raised critical arguments. The seemingly aesthetic poetry of this novel included so much violence. Meanwhile, this violence is discussed in such "loving terms." It can therefore be concluded that this clash was intended to make the reader aware of the savage, twisted inhumanity of the men in the novel. This indicates that Reid most likely used many subtleties to depict very specific situations throughout his novels. For instance, throughout the course of the novel, Reid often associates animalism with whites in order to dehumanise them. The most important symbol, the leopard, is also significant in its literal sense as well as a deeper one. The leopard's role as a representation of cowardliness is evident when "the leopard understands it, for he avoids the strong and eats the weak". (76)

Reid also emphasises the differing tendencies of the blacks and whites attempting to coexist. Throughout the novel, critic Mervyn Morris notes that the blacks are portrayed as being in accordance with nature while the whites are essentially “man made”. They however strive to gain the advantages of the opposing people. In other words, they desired the “white powers” of which they are deprived while whites desire the advantages of being natives of African territories. Furthermore, the relationship between Nebu and his son constitutes, according to Morris, the heart of the novel. Morris contends that Reid employs the son as a symbol of the cultures produced by a meeting of black and white civilisations. This characteristic signifies the love and hate dynamic between groups as well as between individuals.

In *New Day*, Reid indulges music in his narrative technique. One such instance is an occasion where the Morant people, as approved by the County inspector, protest for their voices to be heard:

All this time, noise is swelling around the square. Morant Bay people are getting restless for the shells, and the drums ha’ stopped sounding now. Bogle held up his hands to show that he wants quiet. Quiet comes, then he tells Morant people that he has no’ come to the Bay to give them fun, but that he is speaking justice for the poor. “Hear me now,” he tells them. “We will wait so till Custos finish his Vestry meeting, and then we will hold talk with him. County Inspector says we voices must no’ be loud, but sing, we will sing the hymns o’ our faith. One o’ the brethren will please raise the faithful servants’ song: *Break Down the Walls o’ Jericho*”. Long-tongue Bogle, my mother used to call him, and how his tongue is long this day! (104)

Another occasion is when the traditional pepper song is being rendered. Though historical, Reid still exhibits his style in *New Day* as a writer that advocates for cultural and traditional relevance in his writings.

Huntermen hit the floor with their musket-butts and there are mighty shouts for: “Pepper-pot! Pepper-pot! Martha—you ol’ soak! Where the pepper-pot?” “Coming! We a-come!” she is shouting from the yard. And then through the door I see Martha coming with the big hardwood bowl, from which steam rises like evening mist.... Davie says: “Come, Johnny, taste your pepper-pot!” I take the gourd which he is giving me and go down for a big sip—and *wayah!* Gourdy drops from my hand, and I am coughing and spluttering while eye-water runs down my face! (108)

Vic Reid uses this as a form of cultural aesthetics in his works. The “Africanness” of his works lies solely in his cultural portraiture of the black race in every dimension.

Conclusion

Vic Reid's works reflect the history, political struggles for freedom, culture, and tradition of Jamaica as a representation of the African homeland. Therefore, his writings successfully sustained the aura of the Black literary representation. Through a critical appraisal of the selected novels of Vic Reid, this study offers an insight into the writer's seeming obsession with freedom, its centrality to West Indian collective sensibility, as well as Reid's conscious efforts at weaving the collective freedom motif through his peculiar use of language, into the national psyche his his literary works.

The language of Vic Reid is one that has been regarded as a great achievement. He sustains this language brilliantly throughout his novels, and has succeeded in domesticating the English language to suit his purpose. This is besides his projection of the indigenous traditional language of the Jamaicans, Patois, for maximum effect.

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