Colonial Taboos in H. G. de Lisser : The Withe Witch of Rosehall

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H. G. de Lisser's novel begins with a symbolic picture of Rosehall, standing for the social order produced by colonialism and slavery. The Great House looms before the reader/visitor as the impregnable fortress of white imperialism in the Caribbean, a tabooed object for the awe-struck plantation slave:

> White in the golden light of the sun it stood, the Great House of Rosehall. It dominated the landscape; it imposed itself upon the gaze of all who might pass along the road that ran in front of the property; it indicated opulence. Young Rutherford knew that it represented the pride and arrogance of the planter caste which still ruled in Jamaica (7).

The nature of taboo is that anybody who violates it is struck dead. The Lady of Rosehall has perfectly understood that "Annie ruled her people by terror" (80). She is the unquestioned goddess who metes out punishment to the unworthy. When she appears to young Robert Rutherford for the first time, the latter knows as if by instinct that she is there: "he perceived that the first rider was a woman, white, and at once he knew who it must be" (30). To this young gentleman, freshly landed from England, the Mistress of Rosehall is in the position of Ophelia facing Lord Hamlet, "out of his sphere." He knows that "this must not be."

The whole colonial hierarchy rests on this untouchability. Taboo is something that is never questioned. One just does not mention it.

Even if the young *buckra* is new on the sugar estate, he is a tabooed person:

> The drivers glanced at him also, but asked no questions, for he was white and therefore one of the masters who gave commands and put questions, and was not there to be interrogated by such as they (8).

The colonial hierarchy is thus deeply ingrained and even poor whites at the lower end of the social scale would never dream of infringing upon it. Robert Rutherford, as a metropolitan, shocks Mr Burbridge, the book-keeper on that matter by his impertinent question. How dares he?

> "Just a word. Shouldn't I go up and see the owner?"
> "Mrs Palmer? You, a book-keeper, to call on her?" (9).

And yet, whatever internal social barriers may exist inside the white community, white is white and this superior essence must not be tampered with. John Ashman, the overseer, asks the boy to show the *buckra* his room while reminding the young metropolitan to address the overseer of an estate by the word *Sir*. Colonial discipline is unbending. Should certain taboos be done with, then who knows what might happen...

It is to be noted that white men are to be seen on horses, hardly ever walking with the rank and file. One of the first times we see Mrs Palmer, she is on horseback: "She rode easily with Ashman at her side" (34). Her white overseer, John Ashman, has a horse. So do the white book-keepers. Significantly only the bare-footed slaves go on foot. One is under the impression that getting off one's horse would mean stepping down the social ladder. Keep up the mounted hierarchy! Keep it up! Mr Ashman does not yield on this ground. To speak to Millicent, a young coloured girl, he remains mounted: "He took her out of the hearing of the people around, but did not get off his horse to listen"(82). Class-consciousness which is palpable enough between white masters and black slaves, is evident also in the colonial order between rich and poor Whites as I have mentioned above. Mr Burbridge, the book-keeper, a poor White, finds it perturbing that a man of Robert Rutherford's standing who owns a horse, dresses like an English gentleman and not

like a hardened colonial, should come to Jamaica for a book-keeper's job! This passes his understanding. "It does not look natural" (19). Such things are not done.

In fact, Robert Rutherford is not what he seems. He is the son of a rich estate owner and has been sent under a disguise to learn life on an estate. Mr Burbridge made a correct guess. But there is more to it than that. Robert, being a metropolitan, is a victim of his own taboos as regards a West Indian woman, Mrs Palmer. He rules out wedlock with her. "His father would be grieved, resentful; there would be an estrangement between them" (69). There are grounds upon which even angels fear to tread.

Nevertheless when all is said and done, Annie Palmer, the Mistress of Rosehall, is a white member of the plantocracy. Whatever social barriers may exist between colonial and metropolitan Whites, no coloured person would be allowed to ride roughshod on her superior rights. A coloured damsel (Millicent), traduces Mrs Palmer in front of Robert Rutherford though the latter should harbour some feelings of love for the girl, which is simply unbearable: "It was treason to Annie" (101). The coloured girl had fouled sacred ground.

Things are not in any way different when Annie, the mistress, in true colonial fashion, kicks up a row with Millicent, the servant, about their common lover, Robert Rutherford. Robert is not shocked by his own sexual mores but by the casting aside of a taboo. A white woman, the owner of a big sugar estate, had almost come to blows with a humble servant:

> But don't you understand, Annie, how revolting all this is? You are a white woman, a lady, the Mistress of Rosehall, and you come here and engage in a row with a coloured girl, a row that might have been a fight ... (110).

Annie Palmer, passionate as a Creole woman can be, had not realised that she had overstepped a barrier and brought down a taboo: Millicent, a coloured girl, had almost come into physical contact with a white lady.

But then if the line is so easily crossed, one may ask, upon what do taboos rest?

Indeed if such questions are put, one finds out surprisingly that taboos are houses built on sand. Once Robert Rutherford, the young hero of the novel, starts asking: "Who is he, What is she?" (126), then the walls of Jericho come tumbling down. One question entails another. This tabooed, feared hierarchy appears only as a colonial one. It would vanish in England. The Mistress of Rosehall does not ignore such things:

> She always felt that in England she would count for but little; there would be no supremacy for her there. In Jamaica there was (137).

Being perfectly aware of this colonial donnée, Annie Palmer plays on it. For the slaves, she is a witch with considerable power and they are terrified by her:

> ... I have told you before that we have to rule these people by fear, and I, a woman, must encourage their foolish ideas if I am to hold my own amongst them (168).

But this superstitious, irrational fear is to be found on both sides. It is common to masters and slaves:

> "You know," observed Robert, "it appears to me that you are as much afraid of these people as they are of you."
> "Of course we are," said Rider, "it has been a case of fear on both sides. Fear is in the very texture of the mind of all white people here..." (179).

But how is this fear instilled and kept alive to prop up the colonial order?

One of the main aspects of white colonial power is absolute political and economic supremacy over the black slave population. This is perfectly clear in H. G. de Lisser's novel. But the specific element which in *The White Witch of Rosehall* increases Annie Palmer's domination by a thousandfold is her supposed supernatural power in a colonial world where superstition is rampant.

When Annie Palmer speaks of her supernormal powers, it is a thing she believes in and so do her black servants and the whole slave population:

> But Rosehall Great House itself is not haunted; no house can be haunted if there lives in it a man or a woman strong-minded enough to defy anyone, anything, that might wish to return from the grave to revisit the scenes of its bodily existence (58).

So speaks the Lady of Rosehall grimly referring to the deaths of her three husbands in a foul and most unnatural way.

Here is no laughing matter. No wonder that Millicent, brought up by her uncle Takoo, a local witch-doctor, and steeped in African nocturnal practices, should be afraid of Annie Palmer who wields such power. This is what is murmured abroad about Mrs. Palmer:

> She had done some daring things in the open light of day, and some still more terrible, horrifying things, by the dim light of candles within the heavy walls of Rosehall, if what was whispered about her was true. Millicent trembled (83).

In Millicent's mind "she is hell. She is de devil himself. She is the worse woman in Jamaica!" (85). She is so strong, Millicent confesses. And furthermore, it has been suggested that Annie Palmer comes from Haiti, that considering there is a lot of blood mixture in that French colony, she may be both French and Black and most terrible thing of all, she may be connected with voodoo, which would "account for her witcheries" (127).

Indeed, she commands the apparition of the three-footed horse which terrifies the countryside. This strikes terror into the hearts of Afro-Caribbean slaves as nothing can. Here is a passage describing the effects of the horse on those poor fellows:

> They rushed up to the veranda, their teeth chattering, their eyeballs gleaming white in the faint light of the moon. "The Horse," they gasped, "the Three-footed Horse from Hell!" (116).

This hellish horse is known not only to British but to French Caribbean islanders as well. In the comic strip based upon the *Affaire Beauregard* in Martinique, out of which a film was made, we find this:

> *Shuval la ka galopé*
> *Shuval la ka kuri*
> *Shuval la ka volé* (Auclair and Migeat).

This French connection in the field of the supernatural would lead us to draw the inference that these practices may well have their origin in Africa and might then have been brought over to the whole Caribbean by African slaves.

In *Le Sang du flamboyant*, the supernatural power of making the horse gallop at night is held by Albon, a runaway Black. Indeed, those secret fears are shared by Whites and Blacks alike: "Annie firmly believed in such influences" (213). Such irrational fears natural to some Afro-Caribbeans, shared by white colonials who have stayed too long in the tropics, leave no impression on a fresh-landed metropolitan Englishman like Robert Rutherford. However, he knows that such taboos are not forgotten easily once in some people's minds:

> It came to Robert Rutherford that he was face to face with a terrible problem, an unshakeable conviction in these people's minds (147).

Now Robert Rutherford was gradually getting into the West Indian ethos. If his mind was that of a well-educated English gentleman, his senses as he came into contact with Mrs Palmer were beginning to be

impregnated with the local way of life. He would secretly wonder about wicked spirits treading the earth.

> Besides, did he himself utterly disbelieve in them? In his heart of hearts he knew that he did not (152).

Doubt begins to creep into the most free-thinking minds. Do we not find reference to that in the very Bible? And what when a relapsed clergyman gives support to such questionings. Mr Rider, the clergyman, was taught that the Devil does not exist:

> And the Witch of Endor, you remember, brought the Prophet Samuel up out of his grave (Sam 28).

There is scriptural warrant for believing in witches and human ability to use and control spirits (161). Furthermore, obeah is against the law which thereby attests its existence.

Taboo, however, is used in the novel to increase one's power over others. Their ignorance of beliefs in the supernatural is fully exploited by Mr. Palmer to affirm colonial domination and by Takoo, the freed slave, to get rich at his fellow Afro-Caribbeans' expense:

> And Takoo, by what he made out of lands that he had since acquired by cash purchase [since buying his freedom], and even more by what he had been paid by awe-struck people who went to him covertly for aid against dark supernatural powers . . . (198).

Another compulsive force at work in Caribbean society at that time was sex. Once it insinuates itself in the colonial order, tabooed, inviolated hierarchy gives way to its erosive action.

John Ashman, an undisputed overseer, a person not to be approached easily, is shaken in his self-confidence when he sees that young Robert Rutherford draws the attention of the Lady of Rosehall.

All the more so as his authority on the sugar estate comes partly from the fact that there is a tacit understanding between his employer and himself because of their past intimacy:

> For years he had been practically master of Rosehall and Palmyra, their affairs having been entrusted to his management. He had been more than that, too; he had been Annie Palmer's lover (87).

The overseer of Rosehall knows that Robert Rutherford is no mere book-keeper under his orders. He senses that in the way Robert dresses, speak and addresses both Annie Palmer and himself. Here there is not only professional but sexual rivalry and jealousy on the part of John Ashman who has been brought a step down in his hierarchical aloofness.

What would have been impertinence in any common book-keeper is not considered so in the young gentleman from England. Mrs. Palmer herself says so (36). Moreover, she suggests to Robert that he should call her by her Christian name (37). Sex works its way into this colonial hierarchy. The tabooed goddess comes to earth.

This revered God-ordained colonial order for the trembling slave is like a colossus with clay feet. The worm which eats it up from the inside is the colonial mode of living. There is in the Caribbean — and for that matter, in most countries that have come under colonial rule — a way of life which is the very opposite of a rigid social stratification. Robert Rutherford soon finds that out:

> The West Indian *ethos* was already affecting him. He felt at once inclined to live gaily, riotously, dangerously but today and let the morrow take care of itself (39).

The young hero of *The White Witch of Rosehall* has to face this Jamaican reality when he looks for a housekeeper and finds Millicent: "Yes, if you like me an' I am your housekeeper. You would be my *husband*, don't you understand?" (44). He is admittedly not prepared to face the facts of Caribbean life and what to him "seems to be the custom here" (44).

Annie Palmer with whom his liaison is well under way — indeed he had already spent a night at Rosehall in his first days on the island — poses no problem as regards the violation of that colonial taboo *par excellence*: whiteness. And yet an "unlegalised connubial relation" (68) with Annie Palmer would go against the grain of tradition, "even in Jamaica" (68).

The taboo of whiteness is indeed threatened by Millicent who, as a young woman of mixed parentage, is symbolic of frontiers that ought not to be crossed in colonial intercourse. Millicent seems to be determined to destroy this taboo: "He was not the first young white man that had liked her"(79). Once this taboo is balked at, the whole colonial order apparently built on rock, seems breached. Casting any class-consciousness to the winds, they are all guided by passion and start manipulating one another.

Annie Palmer informs Robert that Millicent was John Ashman's mistress. The overseer who wants to win back Annie Palmer's heart persuades Millicent that Robert Rutherford would be the right choice for her. All this ends up with Robert Rutherford's doing away with colonial taboos and throwing himself into sexual relations, both things he was a stranger to on his arrival on the island. It is the Mistress of Rosehall who dubs him:

> Indeed, considering the company you had tonight, and after having been with me last night, too, I should say that you were already the complete West Indian gentleman! (111)

Robert Rutherford yields — in appearance only — to the West Indian way of life. Annie Palmer's verdict is only partially true. His role in the novel is to be an iconoclast, a violator of colonial taboos. His first appearance on the sugar estate upsets the imposed order. He is dressed as a mere book-keeper:

> He has seen Burbridge eyeing his clothes with a bewildered air; they were certainly much superior to those worn by the ordinary book-keeper or overseer (10).

Indeed he is not a poor White happy to occupy a junior executive's position between the field slave and the plantocracy. His presence jars with this well-oiled machinery:

> he was a West Indian proprietor like herself, or would be some day; meanwhile his worldly fortunes were quite respectable. He could meet her as an equal; she [Annie Palmer] had understood that from the first. She had known him for what he was (41).

As a matter of fact, Robert is on Annie's estate to learn management in agreement with his father whose inheritor he is. But as this is a secret for everybody except the lady of Rosehall, Robert is not where he ought to be. He has interfered with the colonial order. John Ashman, for one, has already been up against this during his love affair with Annie Palmer. Such taboos are not easily transgressed: "Barriers of class were upheld where sometimes every other barrier went down" (89).

The reader will remember the Mistress of Rosehall's outburst when she caught Millicent in Robert's room. Her words testify to this divine right within the colonial hierarchy:

> Do you want to be whipped within an inch of your life? Do you remember who you are talking to? Dirt that you are, how dare you! (106).

It takes a man in Robert Rutherford's social position to come to grips with colonial taboos and oppose them. No slave could do that. he is shocked by a whipping scene and interferes where no white man would do so, let alone a black man:

> The driver hesitated; yet he still held the whip above the young woman. Angered by his attitude, Robert rode up to him and kicked the whip out of his hand, the man uttering an exclamation of pain as he did so (23).

"Diamond cuts diamond," says the proverb. Only a bourgeois philosopher can start a revolution of ideas leading to a political change in a bourgeois social order. The burdened proletariat is often overwhelmed. Such is the case with Robert Rutherford.

He is not, however, the only force at work against local taboos. The clergy, from another angle, is waging the same war. The colonial power is well aware of this threat. Religion, when its own taboos are not questioned, can be a strong weapon.

The novel is set in 1831, a period of English history marked by the anti-slavery movement. In 1807, Charles James Fox forced legislation through Parliament to abolish the slave trade within the British Empire. William Wilberforce had been active in England. The missionaries were only taking up the cue in the colonies to Mrs. Palmer's deep regret for "the good old days" of undisputed imperialism: "There weren't so many missionaries in those days to preach to them and stir up discontent among their slaves" (55). John Ashman who, as an overseer, is in close touch with local problems, echoes Annie Palmer's fears:

> Outside of the estates you run a great risk if you go beyond the law. The missionaries are very active now, and they force the magistrates to take up action (115).

The worst thing for the colonial political structure was the spread of information about what was taking place in England. That lent force to any revolt against the established order:

> Word had got about that a decree which freed the slaves had arrived from England and was being kept back by the masters, and the slaves were in a state of dangerous excitement (87).

Any opposition from the undisputed masters at this juncture could only mean a strong resistance on the part of slaves.

It would not be excessive to infer from this novel that its author, the editor for about forty years of the leading Jamaican daily

newspaper, *The Gleaner,* had sensed the deep change that was on the way in an economic and political regime based upon slavery. The book tells us that strong colonial taboos, the props of the West Indian colonial order, are about to be overruled.

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[1] Jean Leclerc, La Grande Candelle, Allée des Pins, 13009 Marseille (FRANCE).