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*Self-Fashioning and Ambiguities of Revolution in Austin Clarke's "Initiation"*

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## Self-Fashioning and Ambiguities of Revolution in Austin Clarke's "Initiation"

"Initiation" was published by Austin Clarke in 1992 as part of a short story collection titled *In This City*. The collection deals with the complex and ambiguous position of immigrants in the city of Toronto, particularly Barbadians of the African diaspora who occupy a position of the "in-between" in their relationship to the city and to the larger national terrain (Walcott 11). The in-betweenness arises as they cease to belong where they come from and are still "othered" where they have come. In "Initiation," Clark explores the implications and ramifications of this simultaneous position of belonging and not belonging. According to Rinaldo Walcott, Clarke uses this "in-between space as a way to allow readers access to a world and a gaze, from another position which is instructive for the nation" (11-12).

The narrative is set during the late 1990s in Toronto, a time of racial discrimination and marginalisation for the African diaspora, including Black immigrants, at the social, economic, political, and cultural level throughout Canada. This atmosphere generated anti-racist activism against the authorities which in Toronto led ultimately to the Yonge Street riot in 1992 after the trial verdict for the police brutality case of Rodney King acquitted the officers responsible. The riot happened only a few months before *In This City* was published. According to Alexander and Glaze:

While the LAPD trial verdict, and the May 2 Toronto police shooting death of a black suspected of drug trafficking, acted as catalysts, the root causes of black unrest were simmering frustration over perceived mistreatment, discrimination in employment and housing, and a school system dominated by Eurocentric curricula. (14)

"Initiation" asserts the importance of insulated spaces where identities can exist and be expressed in isolation from the volatile urban context that surrounds them. In the story, Jack, a professor of literature from York University, meets up with his student, Barrington, at one of Barrington's friends' places. Barrington presents a different side of himself to his professor, and as the night goes on, the reverse

happens. Barrington and Jack are both upper-middle class members of the African diaspora who suffer from alienation due to the pressure of assimilating into a white-dominated, heteronormative society. They experience anxiety from the white gaze that constantly perceives them as dangerous and hostile based on their race. This gaze forces Barrington and Jack to behave in ways that are restrained, conservative, and modest. According to postcolonial scholar John Ball, “the solid grip that Toronto’s white community has historically held over the city’s economy, institutions, culture, and self-image” expects people of colour living in Toronto to conform to the dominant culture (qtd. in Stolar 136). Both characters must comply with these expectations.

Barrington and Jack are associated with York University, a cultural institution that also functions as a vehicle for the state to engage in governmentality by engineering an “ethical incompleteness” within the minds of its community members, a sense of lack that constantly compels a desire to be “better” citizens. According to Toby Miller, cultural studies and media studies scholar, “ethical incompleteness” is the phenomenon through which “we are incited to continually contemplate our own unresolvable, evolving ethical dilemmas, and paradoxically, to try to resolve them via what Miller calls “a series of exercises of the mind” (qtd. in Wershler 111). This becomes apparent when Jack still wants to “better” himself by going to see a “Garveyite Nationalist speak” for a seminar at York, even though he just got back from the airport after travelling, got drunk, high, and is barely conscious (Clarke 46). The university, along with other sociocultural institutions, plays a huge part in stripping individuals of their cultural traits and turning them into the types of citizens it deems appropriate. After a night of freedom, debauchery, and self-fashioning, though, without cultural constraints and within the safety of a private environment, Jack feels empowered enough to say: “Fuck York!” and Barrington feels secure enough to reply: “Right on!” (Clarke 46).

Thus, the room at Barrington’s friend’s place and the entire west-end of Toronto becomes an outlet to fashion themselves in accord with their own personal will. According to Erving Goffman, all people tailor different “selves” to fit social roles they must play and motivations to play these roles lie in them following their own “self-interest” (11-12). Jack plays the role of a reserved conservative professor at the University and Barrington plays the role of a deprived kid from the “ghetto” as it is in both of their interests in the public sphere to stick to these roles. Jack plays the reserved and conservative professor as it becomes

a testament for his professionalism and work-ethic while Barrington plays to be a “product of the ghetto” as the white-dominant society sees him as exactly that (Clarke 31). It allows him to fit right in with the prevailing neoliberal capitalist discourse, within which progress and development are only possible based on one’s own individual efforts. They both must play these roles to live up to white aesthetics of their society.

However, they both have feelings of insignificance and insufficiency because of feeling alienated from their Barbadian and Black identities which is a consequence of trying to live up to white aesthetics. Another source of their internal inadequacy comes from feeling emasculated in a heteronormative culture where masculinity is valued and centralised. According to Carl Jung, we unconsciously strive for significance and adequacy which we consciously lack (63). Thus, both Barrington and Jack (and even others in the room) unconsciously overcompensate for their internal inadequacy by striving for significance through indulging in a self-fashioning of themselves in hypermasculine ways and with aesthetics and values of the Black Power movement that would assert their race. It allows them to take themselves, at least temporarily, out of their roles in a neoliberal world, which they wish not to partake in but still do as their status is at stake. Cornel Bogle points out that Clarke shows “the failure of Canada to offer spaces for progressive black masculinities, a failure that leads to the need for a broader transnational masculinity that borrows much of its language and many of its postures from the black pride movement of the United States” (171). There is an absence of space for Black masculinity to actualize itself as Black people cannot be seen as assertive, subversive, and actively critical without being labelled by white gaze as “loud”, “problematic” and “dangerous”. Thus, the characters tailor their “selves” with values of hypermasculinity and aesthetics of the Black Power movement, particularly in an insulated space and an area dominated with Black people, which lies in their interest as they become vehicles for them to channel their anger, without letting it directly affect their lives. The whole talk of “revolution” (Clarke 30) and brotherhood (“brother”) borrows from ideas that Elijah Mohamed and Malcolm X were propagating during the 1960s in the US through their organisation Nation of Islam. For this reason, Barrington’s friend converted and became Ali Kamal All Kadir Sudan from Terrence Washington Jefferson Lincoln Lucas. Malcolm X in his interview with Austin Clarke stated:

black people in America are well aware that the Christian church as we have known it has definitely failed us. It has failed to produce brotherhood between black and white Christians...this has produced an atmosphere or climate or season in which the religion of Islam, as taught by the Honorable Elijah Mohamed, has found fertile soil and has been very productive, with productive results. (X, "Clarke/Malcolm X" 265)

An indulgence in the above ideas allows everyone in the room to reclaim their Black identity with a sense of importance that they cannot find in the outside world of the public sphere. The discourse of Black nationalism also entertains a fervour of masculinity for the revolution it demands, which allows people in the room an opportunity to explore their otherwise alienated masculinity. Black nationalist imitations of Fidel Castro smoking the cigar also does the same thing for them because Castro, during the 1960s in the US, became the symbol of revolution after being a part of the Cuban Revolution and the poster boy of "masculine persona" as Jama Lazerow asserts "the young of both sexes, then, needed heroism" (Lazerow 92). The aesthetics of Black Power movement and the fascination with Castro serve the same purpose for all Black men in the room including Barrington and Jack, which is, the expression for a heroic sentiment in their unheroic lives where they live passively and without subversion. Batia Boe Stolar states that "Clarke's Toronto...takes the form of a translucently white female character who deters, rejects, consumes, and ejects the black immigrant who seeks to enter her" (124). This becomes apparent by the fact that all Black immigrants have been pushed to the west-end of Toronto with its poor and challenging conditions, away and outside the city's wealthy areas which receive most investments. Jack describes this distinction as they drive away from the west-end of Toronto by saying, "the avenue became wider and only one line of cars, like Barrington's aunt's, was parked in the lazy wealth and safety of Avenue Road" (Clarke 51). Thus, the city "deters", "rejects" and "ejects" by pushing them onto the margins of its city, even though it "consumes" people like Jack and Barrington by not just using their labor or investment in their institutions like the university but also by completely taking away any potential for them to have authentic "selves" in society.

Both Jack and Barrington experience perpetual alienation. For this reason, John Coltrane's saxophone comes like "a wave of rescue and destruction" (Clarke 30) because it pushes their carefully assimilated public "self" to the margins by bringing out racial and cultural parts of their Black identity that

usually remain unactualized in the white-dominated and heteronormative culture of the city. Interestingly, the saxophone is being played within the tradition of Jazz, which as a genre has a multiplicity to it as different players play different melodies in any song, creating a “broken” effect, but the different melodies permeate with each other to create a single harmony. Thus, Coltrane’s saxophone symbolically provides encouragement to characters to explore their multiplicities in terms of character without fearing the possibility of a contradiction in their “selves”. This makes homosociality among Black men in prose an essentiality, as both “whiteness” and women can threaten their space of freedom in terms of exploring their identities. The presence of any white individual would force everyone to put themselves under the surveillance of their own consciousness as the worry for “acceptable” behaviour would haunt them as it does in a white-driven economy, culture and everyday life. The presence of women would be just as problematic for the men in the room because they have not been able to imbibe the centralised masculine traits, of assertiveness and strength, for men in their culture. The passivity and emasculation they suffer in public life gives them the impression that they are not worthy of women’s attention or presence since they have failed to adopt their prescribed role dictated by the gender-normative conventions in a heteronormative society. Hence, the men in the room would only feel humiliation and shame in their interactions with women due to fear of being judged for not being able to live up to the standards of their gendered role. The presence of women in the room would not allow the men to act with the same bravado that they do. The identity of women through relativity would make the men conscious of their own identity as men and the crisis of masculinity that they have suffered.

Therefore, when the song, “This is a Man’s World”, begins to play, Jack rhetorically asks himself: “Were the men in this room, and their world, of four different sizes and complexions, the men James Brown was singing about?” (Clarke 37). The answer to his question becomes obvious while apprehending that the men in the prose would only be intimidated and reminded of their own manufactured passive state in public life. Hence, according to Jack, they cannot be the “strong men” that James Brown sings about as those men enjoy their active, powerful, and capable status because of the passivity and subservience they impose on women to provide service to them. Clarke’s characters are themselves passive and subservient to a system, which rather makes them vulnerable to the idea of interaction with women.

The “initiation” in question is not just happening into a room or a particular location in Toronto, it is an initiation into an alternate sub-structure which allows escape from the public sphere in terms of the freedom and safety in terms of identity that it provides. “Initiation” also stands for beginning something new, which for Jack will be a new identity that he never imbibed. Thus, as soon as the blinds on the window are pulled by the host and light from outside creeps in, the whole incident feels like a “dream” to Jack, and he wants to treat it like that (Clarke 37). The whole incident is treated like that because it is a temporary escape and not a permanent solution to issues. This is what makes everyone’s relationship to any “revolution” in the narrative ambiguous.

The narrative takes a very ambiguous perspective regarding the prospect of a revolution due to two factors. First, a revolution can be very unpredictable and uncontrollable in its fervour. It can end up being good or bad. This is shown through the flashes from Harlem that the professor gets from his time there after encountering a huge crowd of protesters in Toronto. He remembers a leader of the Black Power movement in Harlem giving a speech in which he argues, “If we say that we want to form something that’s based on black people getting together, the white man calls that racism. Mind you, that is right. And you have some o’ these Negroes in Harlem, these white-minded Negroes running round here saying, ‘That’s racism.’” (Clarke 49). There is potential in this speech for uniting Black people against oppressive forces, but it also has the potential to cause divisions between themselves as Black people that do not agree with the narrative of the Black Power movement are immediately stripped of their “Blackness” by being called “white-minded”. This possibility of divisive politics is what manifests Clarke’s, what David Chariandy calls, “critical detachment from, American black nationalism.” (9).

The second factor that creates an ambiguity for revolution has to do with the position of the professor and his student. They are both privileged members of their society, regardless of the roles they must maintain. They have something to lose. Their quest for revolution can come at the price of them losing what they have. Thus, it is quite symbolic when Barrington and Jack are quickly trying to get the car started, so that they can get away before they are swarmed with the crowds of protesters in Toronto. Malcolm X in his interview with Clarke referred to this dilemma of the privileged Black man, that Clarke in the story seems to acknowledge, when he stated that “the Negro who refers to himself as the bourgeois,

middle class or professional Negro, he is interested, but...the economic crumbs he receives come from the white man, so he has to hide his interest. He has to camouflage his interest. He has to camouflage his sympathy.” (X, “Clarke/Malcolm X” 265)

Ironically, the source of ambiguities of revolution also happens to be the source of the vocabulary of their momentary self-identification and self-fashioning as rebels striving for subversion, the US during the long 1960s. The Black Power movement was at its peak during the long 1960s with activism for all kinds of different issues being on the rise. Among different strands of activism for structural change, the Black Power movement was one of them. However, the 1960s also saw the advent of a new counterculture which advocated for a playful engagement with reality and emphasised the need to discover oneself as more important than anything else. Thus, the counterculture attracted those people towards itself who had lost hope for any change or revolution. According to Lazerow, “Social critics rebelled against the conformity and impersonality of the age. Rock ‘n’ Roll music... raised uncomfortable issues of race and class. The beats rejected materialism and conformity, and embraced jazz, oriental philosophy, drugs, mysticism, and sex.” (93)

The events at Barrington’s friend’s place seem to portray the history of the 1960s in its microcosm with talks of revolution exhibiting a desire for structural change but ultimately it being dropped for a free space of self-exploration amid Rock ‘n’ Roll of James Brown, drugs and companionship that it offers. Thus, towards the end of the story, Jack says, “I wished Barrington had already delivered this Mustang jalopy to Ali Kamal All Kadir Sudan; and I wished that his Barbadian-born aunt did not need the Benz to drive to Florida with her husband. And I wished that it was still summer, and that we could...” (Clarke 51) as he is forced to confront their fragmented states which makes him question their authenticity as people. It is for this reason that he does not finish the above quoted sentence as he does not know what they could have done but he does wish that it was not what they did end up doing that night. Jack’s confrontation with this incongruity in terms of the “self” is not resolved by Clarke probably because he does not think such a dilemma or even others for Black immigrants can be easily resolved. Thus, the narrative ends when it is time to get back to York and maintains its ambiguity on different issues, like revolution versus conformism, individualism versus collectivism, and authenticity versus inauthenticity, from the beginning till the end.

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