Consciousness, the epistolary novel and the Anglophone Caribbean writer: Paulette Ramsay's Aunt Jen

Article · April 2014

CITATIONS
0

READS
226

1 author:

Milt Moise
University of Florida

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

Epistolary fiction View project
Consciousness, the epistolary novel and the Anglophone Caribbean writer: Paulette Ramsay’s *Aunt Jen*

— Milton A.P. Moise

In Georg Lukács’, *The Theory of the Novel*, first published in 1920, he argues that the growth of the novel is concomitant with the growth of self-consciousness (Bray 3). For Lukács, a world that has been abandoned by God has caused the totality of meaning to come under question, and the “antagonistic duality of soul and world,” along with “the agonising distance between psyche and soul” has created what he calls “the autonomous life of interiority” (66). This inner world is depicted in the “inner form of the novel” as:

the process of the problematic individual’s journeying towards himself, the road from dull captivity within a present reality – a reality that is heterogenous in itself and meaningless to the individual – towards clear self-recognition.

(Lukács 80)

The novel depicts “adventures of interiority,” and its contents contain stories of souls that go on journeys of self-discovery, seeking to be proven and tested by adventures and in the process, discover their own essence (Lukács 89). The individual consciousness of the characters becomes primary in the novel, leading to a tension between the internal and the external man. Lukács laments this development, as he sees the process of individuation becoming more of a subjective and internal matter, where “the subjectivity of the individual becomes the object of experimentation and expression” (37). His ideas are in stark contrast to those of Bakhtin, who praises the novel for its presentation of many language registers and meanings that surface as a result of the exploration of individual subjectivity. In his 1941 essay, “Epic and Novel,” Bakhtin agrees that there is a tension between the inner and outer man in the novel, but that the ensuing disintegration of the individual and elevation of interiority produces an astonishingly open-ended number of languages and voices.
Citing Dostoevsky’s novels as examples, Bakhtin celebrates the novel for its “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices,” that he terms heteroglossia (60). While Lukács views consciousness as being concerned with impressions, thoughts and feelings, Bakhtin sees it as being more all encompassing and social. For him, it becomes “an active participant in social dialogue,” (276) and Bray argues that Bakhtin’s notion of consciousness is inescapably tied to “social realities and the competing struggles of heteroglossia” (Bray 5). In novels where there are two or more types of language included, each form of speech represents a voice, an accent and a socio-linguistic consciousness, as each variant of language carries with it a particular way of not only seeing the world, but also of expressing it (Bray 5). Therefore, while Lukács’ view of consciousness in the novel allows us to adequately explore subjectivity, it fails to account for how that individual mind wrestles with the cultural processes of the larger world and community it will inevitably face (Bray 6). Bakhtin’s concept of consciousness being a more socio-ideological phenomenon is thus more relevant and complex, especially when one considers its implications for epistolary fiction.

The vehicle through which consciousness is conveyed in novels is narration. By using a first person narrative voice, writers are able to directly access the mind of their characters, and so the concept of “voice” is inextricably linked to consciousness. The epistolary text in particular, is a rewarding medium for exploring this nexus, as:

The form of personal letters implies intimacy and demands attention to voice (the particular note of a correspondent putting words on paper) and consciousness (the actuality behind the voice), it implies emphasis on consciousness: form thus entailing theme. (Spacks 94)

Since epistolary fiction puts us in the position of voyeurs, as what we are reading is ostensibly for someone else’s eyes, it forces us to concentrate on the mental condition of the primary character[s] in a seemingly more direct fashion than other forms of narration. By choosing the epistolary form, novelists implicitly state their concern for individuals, the nuances
of their personal voice, awareness of themselves and other people, as well as their place in the world. (Spacks 104-105). The conceit of the epistolary form is that through the process of narration, the reader can trace the move from a shaken, fragmented psychological condition to a more stable one. Thus, the growing sense of consciousness that is evident in the text is a demonstration of identity formation, which takes place through time: the self of one’s past, can only be linked to the self of one’s present and future if one is consciously aware of it. John Locke argues that “it is impossible to make personal Identity to consist of anything but consciousness” (343), and, in a manner reminiscent of Benveniste’s view of the subjective “I”,¹ as well as Bakhtin’s notion that consciousness is socially constructed, he proposes that only by distinguishing themselves from other sentient beings can humans attain selfhood. Paulette Ramsay, through the voice of her protagonist Sunshine in her novel Aunt Jen, portrays the development of consciousness in a young woman in 1970’s Jamaica, and also engages in meta-commentary on her perception of the task facing the Anglophone Caribbean writer.

Aunt Jen opens with these rather ominous words: “Dear Aunt Jen, Last night I had a very bad dream” (1). From the onset the reader is made privy to the fact that the protagonist is in a state of emotional disarray. We are informed that it is the third time Sunshine has dreamt about her mother, with each occurrence being a different variation of the two of them being separated from each other by a body of water. The Atlantic Ocean is the actual body of water that divides them, as it is revealed that Sunshine’s mother left for England in a boat similar to the one that appears in her dream. Speaking in the first letter, dated 21 February, 1970, Sunshine laments that her mother has no face in the dreams, and this disturbing image is the catalyst that spurs her to write. The physical distance has created an emotional one, which is evidenced not only by the trauma depicted in the dreams, but also by the manner in which she refers to her mother, calling her “Aunt Jen.” While she maintains this general tone of formality throughout the early letters, the young woman reaches out for affirmation and affection while writing, signing off with
closings such as “Love, Sunshine,” (3, 5, 11, 14, 19) “Anxious to hear from you” (7) and “Until I hear from you” (10). Despite the fact that Sunshine has a maternal figure in the person of her grandmother, it is obvious that her mother’s prolonged absence and silence is an open wound in the young woman’s life, and when her tentative, hopeful missives solicit no response, the resulting disappointment and anger that surfaces in her writing is justifiable.

In the letter dated 30 July 1970, Sunshine says, “I am so ashamed of myself that I was putting pressure on you to write me. I should know that something was wrong with you why you didn’t want to write” (10). This demonstrates the deferential tone that is present in her early letters, and the careful, polite restraint with which they are written. She closes this letter by saying “Love, Your d Sunshine” (11). Her self-editing reveals her inner desire to have a mother and to ascribe herself as a daughter, fill the void that is plaguing her existence, and indicates her awareness of the fact that the role she is seeking to assert may not be welcome or appropriate. Sadly, no response is forthcoming, and when she receives a card from her mother entitled “Thinking of you” on the 26th of September 1970, with a five-pound note enclosed in it, her dismay is palpable (19-22). From that point onward, Sunshine drops “Love” from her closings, which testifies to the disillusionment she feels towards her mother, and the realization that her correspondence appears doomed to be one sided. In what is initially a rather confusing section of the novel, Ramsay has Sunshine rewrite the letter to her mother where she discusses the card, no less than five times. By doing so Ramsay points out the sense of propriety and social expectations her protagonist struggles to negotiate, and also demonstrates how the conflict between the private and the social self, which is such a key aspect of the epistolary novel, functions as a stimulus for the development of Sunshine’s consciousness.

Sunshine offers the following explanation for her writing in a letter dated 3 June 1970: “Anyway, I was just sitting down doing nothing so I thought I would write to you. Actually, I like to write. Sometimes I write letters or poems to myself so I enjoy doing it” (4). She views writing as
an avenue to alleviate boredom and escape the realities of her life. As a teenager, she has little agency or control of the world she inhabits. In a similar fashion to her literary precursor, Pamela, writing becomes a way of exerting control over her environment, and creates a space where her voice can have pre-eminence (Spacks 100). However, because Sunshine’s correspondence was initially intended to be dialogic, and directed to an adult, there were expectations of what could and could not be said which inhibited her expression and stifled her voice. At first, she responds to receiving the card with anger, even throwing it through the window in disgust, and calls her mother “a hard person” (20). But by page 22, the letter she ultimately posts has been whittled down to:

Dear Aunt Jen,
It was nice to hear from you at last. I have never seen such a beautiful card before. It’s nice. Thank you for the card and for the money.
Sunshine. (22)

In a matriarchal society such as the Anglophone Caribbean, lines of authority are very clearly outlined. Sunshine’s outburst of emotion, though justified, would be considered rude, and so she excises the lines that would have been deemed objectionable. In the rather lengthy letter detailing the death of Uncle Johnny dated 16 March 1971, Sunshine gives voice to this herself, explaining that:

Your sympathy card reminded me of the first time you wrote to me. I was so disappointed that it was just a card that I wrote several letters to you and couldn’t mail some of them because I wrote them in my anger. I even rewrote the letter I wrote to you a few weeks after because there were parts of it where I knew I was really passing my place [emphasis mine]. I’m really not doing well at this waiting waiting on a letter from you. (31)

At this point in the development of her consciousness, she appears to have run up against societal strictures and has acceded to them. She accepts that her reaction was out of bounds and unacceptable by her society’s standards. But later in the text she compares her mother to a “hibiscus hedge” because like a plant, she sits still and never replies (37). Somewhat ironically, the knowledge that there will be no response
and thus, no censure forthcoming, liberates Sunshine and allows her to be more free with her writing, and so the move from a dialogic form of expression to a monologic one allows her to skirt the boundaries of acceptable speech. She abandons the conciliatory tone so evident in her early letters, even going so far as to say “[s]ometimes I get really angry with you. Sometimes I feel like I would rip you to pieces just like the letters” (45). Her change in tenor and growing confidence is due to the fact that she is now claiming the letter as a truly personal space of expression, where she can challenge authority and arrive at a greater comprehension of self.

Over the course of four years, from her first letter to her mother dated 21 February 1970, to her last on 18 May 1974, Sunshine moves from a naïve, nascent and localized understanding of self to a more mature, global perception of identity. She initially views life through the prism of fairy tales and Bible stories, and uses them in order to make sense of her world. In a bid to comprehend why her mother left Jamaica, she writes:

Well, when I think about this fortune seeking thing, I think of the people in storybooks who are always leaving to go and seek their fortune… The prodigal son in the Bible went to seek his fortune too, only he didn’t have as much luck as the ones in the story books and he ended going back home poor poor poor. I hope you found your fortune by now. (18)

According to Kamau Brathwaite, one of the legacies of colonialism is that “[p]eople were forced to learn things which had no relevance to themselves” (310). Réné Ménil builds on this point, arguing that “[i]t cannot be denied that the books upon which the Caribbean is nourished have been written in countries with other readers in mind” (50). The imposition of Western folk and fairy tales, along with Biblical stories on the populace for educational and spiritual instruction created a sort of dissonance where the language, settings and people who were present in these accounts, bore little resemblance to those to whom they were given. As Sunshine continues to develop, she grows to appreciate her local traditions, culture and history, and starts to view the world through
a different lens. She learns that her mother was one of those who left for England as part of the “Windrush Generation,” in order to escape from her chauvinist father in September 1970 (17). But perhaps even more importantly, as documented in her letter of March 20 1972, she finds out that her maternal grandmother is a descendent of Maroons. The discovery that “I come from a long line of fighters!” emboldens her and causes her to believe that, “History is real real. Everything I know from history class suddenly turn real real through Ma’s stories about her parents” (73). Despite the fact that she is “still trying to figure out why things happen sometimes” (75), the knowledge that her ancestors actively fought for freedom inspires her, leading her to conclude that she too will resist, and not be a passive viewer of life (73). Toni Morrison argues that in addition to its oral quality, a key element of black writing is the presence of an ancestor. For Morrison, this has a telling impact on the characters’ concept of self and she elaborates by saying, “these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationship to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343).

Ma fulfills this function for Sunshine, as she not only takes care of her, but also informs her about her family history through stories. In Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, it is Nettie, Celie’s sister, who accomplishes this on a more macro level, as she teachers her sister about Africa and the ancestral ties of the motherland, while also revealing the stories of their family’s past through her letters. Upon seeing Africa for the first time Nettie tells her sister that:

> Did I mention my first sight of the African coast? Something struck in me, in my soul, Celie, like a large bell, and I just vibrated. Corrine and Samuel felt the same. And we kneeled down right on deck and gave thanks to God for letting us see the land for which our mothers and fathers cried-and lived and died-to see again. (143)

Nettie’s sojourn in Africa connects both sisters to a sense of something greater, and allows the history they have only known in theory up to that point, to become “real real.” Like Sunshine, Celie also learns about...
her own sordid family history, namely that her father was lynched, her mother was driven insane and the people she had always thought of as family, were not blood relatives (177). While painful, this knowledge is ultimately liberating, as it forces her to confront her demons and move on with her life. Both Celie and Sunshine reckon with the past in order to make sense of the present and offer potential hope for the future.

Throughout the diegesis of the text Sunshine exhibits growth in many aspects of her life. She becomes more politically conscious, remarking that she was finally able to top Mathematics because her competitors, Milton and Jimmy, are distracted by politics (55). She appears to distrust Michael Manley, referred to only as “Joshua” in her letters, expressing the view that while he is a beguiling speaker, she does not put much stock in his oratorical skills, and agrees with her grandmother that actions speak louder than words (56-57). But she also has her first major disagreement with Ma over religion, disappointed that she made her walk for miles to the Sunny Hill Anglican church instead of the Zion church which was closer to home (66-67). In the second half of the letter dated 12 March 1972, she exhibits a keen sense of the hypocrisies of religion, and comments upon how despite its claims to the contrary, it perpetuates class divisions in the community and divides families. Describing what happens after church she says:

[...everybody would be hugging and kissing and greeting each other. Well, not everybody – the most important people or the people who think they are important and the people who like to be seen with important people would hug and kiss each other. (68)

She quotes her grandmother as claiming “… de Anglican church – de Church of England – is de only church dat have people wid intelligence,” as well as recounting the tale of Aunt Sue’s brother in law who refused to attend his brother’s funeral on a Saturday because he was a Seventh Day Adventist (70-71). Despite Ma’s progressive views on the importance of Jamaica’s culture and history, she still clings to the Anglican church as a symbol of authority. Through the different voices of her characters as documented by Sunshine, Ramsay not only illustrates Sunshine’s growth
with regard to this issue, but also critiques the oppressive hold religion
has on Jamaican society. As her consciousness pits itself against the strong
personalities of her family, it is evident that Sunshine is beginning to
think for herself, and form her own opinions. But for the protagonist
of Ramsay’s novel, the death of her grandmother is the event that causes
everything to fall into perspective, and her to become more self-aware.

After Ma dies sometime in early October 1972, Sunshine goes into
a state of shock that prevents her from attending the funeral. Her period
of mourning coincides with the onset of her period, along with her
mother’s sudden interest in her and the family’s affairs.\(^2\) This confluence
of milestones leads her to tell her mother that she needs time to think
and decide what course of action is best. She comes to believe:

\[
\text{[i]t’s because I’m spending so much time thinking about what I really want that}
\]
\[
\text{I’m beginning to understand my life a little more. In other words, I’m a little}
\]
\[
\text{wiser than I was at the start of the game.}
\]
\[
\text{Sunshine}
\]

PS: I hope I’m not talking in parables. (91)

The mention of “parables” is important, as Ma had always spoken to
Sunshine using proverbs and parables. In the letter dated 12 March 1972,
Ma tells a story about Breda Tiger’s children wanting to return to him
and leave the care of Anancy the spider. After searching for their father
who does not want to be found, they have no choice but to return to
Anancy, who receives them with open arms. A strength of the epistolary
is that it creates a sort of dramatic irony, where the main character is
sometimes unaware of the significance of events, while the reader is able
to draw parallels, make connections and fill in the gaps. In the process of
reading the novel, the reader realizes that there are lacunae in Sunshine’s
awareness of self. She thinks Ma’s story was “not really so good” (65), but
the reader is able to see the connection between the story of the prodigal
son she referenced earlier on page 18, and Ma’s folk tale, while Sunshine
does not. Ramsay is articulating the value of Anancy stories, which are
a remnant of a West African tradition that has made the journey across
the Atlantic, and declares them an epistemologically viable, and indeed
more appropriate medium to convey the West Indian experience than
European fairy tales. It totally eludes Sunshine that in Ma’s story, Breda
Tiger represents her mother. In the same way Sunshine has never seen
her mother, Breda Tiger’s children “never see tiger from dem bawn.” In
this story, Breda Tiger’s searching, prodigal children are a metaphor for
Sunshine, and when they return home ashamed and weary after being
rejected by Breda Panther (as Sunshine has repeatedly been rejected by
her mother), Anancy’s “Welcome home, my children” (65), is Ma’s way
of assuring Sunshine that she will always have a home with her, and that
she is her real mother. After Ma has died, Sunshine’s language more
closely approximates Ma’s, and she finds herself “speaking in parables”
and using some of her expressions: “I really wish you wouldn’t badda
badda me though – to use one of Ma’s phrases” (96) [emphasis mine].
It is through Ma’s absence that she is finally able to appreciate the potency
and efficacy of her language. Wilson Harris posits that:

The concept of language is one which continually transforms inner and outer
formal categories of experience, earlier and representative modes of speech
itself… the peculiar reality of language provides a medium to see in consciousness
the ‘free’ motion and to hear with consciousness the ‘silent’ flood of sound by a
continuous inward revisionary and momentous logic of potent explosive images
in the mind. (32)

The evolution of Sunshine’s use of language is an inevitable outcome of
her growth in consciousness, which significantly alters how she perceives
the world, and also how she experiences it. Speaking to her biological
mother, Sunshine explains: “… when Ma died, all of me died; that is
the old Sunshine died” (97). This allusion to the death of her innocence
underscores the fact that she is no longer a naïve, searching young woman.
She makes the decision not to go meet her mother in England, but instead
to stay in Jamaica with her Aunt Sue until she is ready to go to university
in the United States. At the conclusion of the novel, in the letter penned
by “Aunt Jen’s” granddaughter, it is revealed that Sunshine “…always says
these Jamaican expressions,” thus honouring Ma’s memory, passing along

68 Journal of West Indian Literature
the cultural luggage to her daughter, and maintaining a connection to the land of her birth (99). By the novel’s conclusion, we meet a fully functioning adult who, despite her estrangement from her mother, has a family and a successful career. Sunshine’s process of individuation has been completed, but for her daughter born in diaspora, it has only just begun.

Of course, Sunshine did not just burst unto the pages of Aunt Jen ex nihilo. Despite the distance between the author and her main character, elements of the novel remind us that it is a work of fiction over which Paulette Ramsay hovers, not least the fact that Sunshine herself is a writer, of sorts. As Spacks convincingly argues, epistolary fiction makes us uniquely aware of aspects of the writing process, which include an author’s motivation (94). One of the reasons Sunshine provides is that “[u]sually writing helps me to stop thinking so much about things” (43). As Freud intimates in “Creative Writers and Daydreaming,” writing is a form of play that creative writers find pleasurable. He also believes, perhaps more significantly, that people who write do so in order to grapple with their own neuroses and concerns (711-716). While Sunshine does obtain pleasure from writing, the aforementioned self-edited section from pages 19-22 suggests that part of her experience was very emotional and painful. Speaking of the creation of poetry, T. S. Eliot challenges Wordsworth’s admonition that “poetry [be] the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (444), instead advocating for an escape from emotion in order to create great poetry (Eliot 764). On the extra-diegetic level, Ramsay is weighing in on this long running literary debate, as Sunshine’s rewriting (which Ramsay displays to the reader) is a meta-comment on not only the practical reality of editing, but also how rigid adherence to a formalism that keeps emotion at bay can potentially neuter a work of literature. This is especially relevant to the Anglophone Caribbean, which, because of its history of oppression and slavery, contains “depth[s] of inarticulate feeling and emotion” which need to be mined (Harris 28). An unfortunate feature of Caribbean life is that it has revolved around this suppression of emotion for centuries. Sunshine is
a proxy for the West Indian writer, whose task is to find an appropriate medium to voice these feelings, not be inhibited by the constraints of language, form, and propriety, and break through the inarticulateness Harris believes characterizes the region. The final letter from this section that Sunshine eventually sends to her mother is curt and formal, but as she grows throughout the course of the novel, her missives become longer, more personal and thus more emotional. The restrictiveness of the formal letter is abandoned for a looser, more creative iteration that facilitates a truer expression of voice.

Dubem Okafor argues that West Africa and the West Indies both exhibit a fragmentation of consciousness that is a result of colonialisation and slavery. He posits that novelists from the English speaking Caribbean especially, have incorporated themes of psychic reintegration into their texts in a bid to fuse together the various aspects of the West Indian self (158). In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Derek Walcott also expresses this idea, proposing that:

This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, these icons and sacred vessels, taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent. (69)

Single voiced epistolary novels are extremely rare in Anglophone Caribbean writing. When the epistolary does appear, it is often as a form of narrative amongst others, as in Garth St. Omer’s *J-, Black Bam and the Masqueraders*, Olive Senior’s short story “Lily Lily,” or Alecia McKenzie’s metafictional short story “Full Stop.” Perhaps the reason why so few West Indian writers have attempted epistolary novels in the vein of *Aunt Jen* is that in a region which is syncretic, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and as a result, uniquely multi-voiced, the seemingly restrictive nature of the epistolary novel written from the perspective of one individual has little appeal. However, I believe West Indian novelists have been too hasty in their dismissals: while its focus on the consciousness and voice of the
protagonist may initially appear as a limitation, there is ample room to flourish within its spaces. The epistolary novel’s emphasis on bringing an individual who is psychically fragmented to a more stable mental state lends itself perfectly to the task literary authors have been engaging in for much of the region’s history. More Anglophone Caribbean writers should avail themselves of this literary form.

Notes

1 Emile Benveniste, French linguist and semiotician who in the chapter “Subjectivity in Language” from his 1971 book *Problems in General Linguistics*, argues that “[l]anguage is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a subject by referring to himself as I in his discourse” against whom everyone else becomes the you, postulating that identity formation commences with a recognition of a subjective, individual self (225).

2 On pages 84-85 it is implied that Sunshine’s mother is concerned about the will, thus throwing the sincerity of her renewed interest in her daughter into question.

3 In the letter dated 18 May 1974 Sunshine declares that “You are my mother but Ma was my ma – my real ma and there will never be another ma for me” (97).

Works Cited


MILT MOISE is currently pursuing an M.Phil in English at the UWI Cave Hill campus. His research interests include epistolary fiction and metafiction, diasporic fiction, the Caribbean short story, the novel, and dramatic television as a narrative medium. His research project is an exploration of self-referentiality and voice in Anglophone Caribbean fiction.

KIM ROBINSON-WALCOTT is currently the editor of Caribbean Quarterly and Jamaica Journal. Her Ph.D thesis was published as the award-winning Out of Order! Anthony Winkler and White West Indian Writing, and her work has appeared in Sargasso, Smallaxe and JWIL. She also writes poetry and short stories and was the winner of the Commonwealth Short Story competition in 2005, and published a children’s book, Dale’s Mango Tree in 1992.

LOMARSH ROOPNARINE is an Associate Professor of Latin American and Caribbean Studies at Jackson State University, U.S.A. He has authored Indo-Caribbean Indenture: Resistance and Accommodation (University of the West Indies Press 2007) as well as over three dozen articles in peer-reviewed regional and international journals.

CARRIE J. WALKER is an Associate Professor of English at Concordia University in Portland, Oregon. Her Ph.D examined the resurgence of the epistolary novel among women writers across the Black Atlantic, and focused on Sindiwe Magona, Nozipo Maraire, and Paulette Ramsay, arguing that these authors use the epistolary genre both to intervene in public debates on women’s human rights and to challenge the universalist principles that underpin human rights laws and assumptions regarding citizenship. She held a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Nevada-Reno and a Fulbright award in Jamaica 2011-2012, and has taught at Bucknell University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and Nebraska Wesleyan University.