Janice Shinebourne, Time-Piece and The Last English Plantation

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Abstract
A major phenomenon in the recent development of Caribbean literature has been the emergence of a fairly large number of women writers who are taking over from a predominantly male tradition and filling the gap caused by the failure of new significant male fiction writers to appear after the first wave from the fifties to the seventies. Janice Shinebourne's remarkable first novel partakes of this flowering of new talents. It is, to use an expression of her countryman Wilson Harris, an 'act of memory', initiated by the protagonist-narrator's visit to her native village in Guyana. Pheasant, a village in the canefields of the Berbice area has been wiped out by the mechanization of estate work in both canefields and factory. When Sandra Yansen returns, the one family still living there do not remember the past, and there is only her own family's 'dying house', a ruin symbolical of the vanished close-knit community, to signal the 'unperturbed presence' of familiar ghosts.
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The two major parts of the novel emphasize the contrast between rural Guyana, where the solidarity of genuine community still prevailed in Sandra's youth, and materialistic, competitive Georgetown which in the mid-sixties, when Sandra took a job there as a reporter, forced many talented young people to leave, not just to study abroad but to stay away from a racially and politically divided society and from an impending dictatorship. The rural world near the Canje river and on the outskirts of the forest is evoked with great sensitiveness and a touch of nostalgia but never with sentimentality. There was no racial discord among the villagers who struggled to survive, unaware that their precarious, exploited condition foreboded their disappearance when no longer needed. It was also a world dominated by strong women, whatever their racial origin, where Sandra's father, a humanist and spiritual man by inclination had taken refuge from the money struggle in the capital and the temptations of ambition in himself.

In contrast with this matriarchal community close to the land (the canefields, the forest, the river) Sandra discovers in Georgetown the difficulties of asserting herself as a woman both in her profession and in personal relationships, though hers is not a militant feminism. As in her recreation of Pheasant, it is the very nature of Guyanese society, its colonial past and threatening future that she explores in her portrayal of individual lives. Her characters are the makers of Guyanese history.
in a crucial and troubled period when the country was moving from colonial status to independence against a background of race riots and personal ambition, and failing to achieve true freedom and equal opportunity. But again, this is indirectly suggested through the characters’ experience.

At the end of this beautifully written novel the narrator asks: 'Was there no dirge that could mourn his [her father's] death, no song celebrate the life he had invested in this stranded and exploited village?' The answer to that question is her own narrative. Janice Shinebourne received for it a deserved prize from the Guyanese government, one of the literary awards attributed for the first time in Guyana. Though she was the only woman in a group of male writers (Wilson Harris, Fred d’Aguiar, Marc Matthews), one is tempted to say with Gordon Rohlehr that 'the woman will be carrying the major burden of writing [in the Caribbean] in the near future'. (Kijk-Over-Al, 38, June 1988)

This is confirmed by her next novel, *The Last English Plantation* (Peepal Tree Press, 1988), which also concentrates on local history in a brief and difficult period of transition in the early 50s, when the villagers in New Dam on the Canje River attempt to assume responsibility for their own lives under a still paternalistic plantation system and British troops are called in to prevent sedition. In this context of crisis, the heroine June, slightly older than Lamming’s ‘G’, more passionately rebellious and highly conscious, prepares to go to high school in New Amsterdam, while all her former schoolfriends have already started working on farms, in the canefields or factory. Here again the strength of the narrative lies in the felt immediacy of the social and historical circumstances the villagers are experiencing and the heroine’s intense sharing of their condition and troubles, her understanding of impending political changes that may take little account of the ordinary people’s aspirations to political and economic emancipation. The third-person narrative is told from her point of view, and she may seem at times unusually perceptive for a twelve-year old. But she is a sensitive recreation of mixed adolescence and childhood, particularly in her contradictory impulses: her recognition of the need for education (which she knows to be possible only because of her parents' sacrifice) and her loyalty to the village and its people, her longing also for the sense of security they offer. This is shattered in her first days at school when she is confronted with the racial and social prejudices of other children (and some teachers’), more ferocious than any adult’s. As the Martin Carter epigraph confirms, this is a novel about the difficulties of becoming and finding one’s self for both a young girl and the disintegrating plantation society in which she was born. Her future remains a question mark as does the direction her creator’s writing will now take.