

Testing the Limits

Forbidden Love in Two Anglophone Caribbean Texts

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Forbidden love is a form of romantic love that is a recurrent theme in literature. Forbidden love relationships often involve an unsuitable male attempting to gain the affection of an unattainable female with the liaison usually ending tragically for the lovers. Debates about forbidden love as a universal theme question whether this theme is “constructed” or “natural” (Gottschall and Nordlund, 2006, pp. 450-451). According to Gottschall and Nordlund (2006), literary scholars and social scientists suggest that if romantic love is socially constructed, it is indicative of Western culture. If romantic love is natural, it is the result of combinations of human emotion, attachment, and psychology. In this essay, forbidden love is addressed as a characteristic of natural, human emotions rather than a social construct with a specific code of conduct. As Caribbean culture is neither homogenous nor entirely Western-influenced and forbidden love is a theme in some Caribbean texts, forbidden love is not a social construction but the result of natural human emotions. This essay examines texts from two Trinidadian authors, Shani Mootoo’s (2005) *He Drown She in the Sea* (hereafter *He Drown She*) and Elizabeth Nunez’s (2006) *Prospero’s Daughter*. Both authors approach thematic forbidden love as acting against the social constructs guiding relationships while addressing different conventions. Mootoo’s (2005) text takes a

tried and true approach to forbidden love. In *He Drown She*, a middle-class, Indo-Caribbean woman leaves her husband of thirty years to engage in a forbidden love relationship with a working class man. Their relationship is complicated not only by social and familial obligations, but by her husband's powerful position in their country's government. Because the possibility of her husband's retaliation exists, they abandon their established lives for love. Nunez's (2006) text pushes the boundaries of a relationship's social acceptability by tackling miscegenation in pre-independence Trinidad. In *Prospero's Daughter*, a young woman crosses familial, social, and racial boundaries for love, forcing her to decide between an emotional attachment and social acceptability. This is an interracial relationship, which may not seem particularly groundbreaking today; however, in the Caribbean during the early 1960s interracial relationships were not the norm—particularly relationships between young British girls and mixed race, Trinidadian boys.

Forbidden love stories are comprised of three key elements: secrecy, pursuit of an unattainable female lover, and the presence of an unsuitable male lover. One of the key elements of forbidden love stories is that the relationship is conducted clandestinely. Secrecy is a necessity as the participants are involved in legitimate relationships with others, or they are prevented from having a relationship by familial or social pressures. In forbidden love stories, the woman is often unattainable to her lover as familial or social obligations separate them. As a result, a woman is placed out of the reach of a male lover leading to the relationship being conducted secretly. The male lover is usually considered unsuitable for a variety of reasons; one reason for his unsuitability is a difference in social class. In romantic tales, a man is considered an unsuitable match if he is from a lower social class than his lover. A male lover is expected to provide some financial support for his female lover, who may at some point become his wife. For the women in romantic tales, marrying for love is essential, but there is also an element of social acceptability. Women try to marry into a higher social class to afford themselves the financial and social stability needed to maintain a family. Although relationships between lower class women and upper class men are more accepted, a social imbalance exists between the two parties.

Richardson (1988, p.210) notes that forbidden sexual relationships “are typically constructed between *status unequals*” as age, class, or marital status create an imbalance between the lovers. Relationships of this kind are often held to social or family scrutiny stemming from the participants’ roles as status unequals. Class divisions remain an important component in Caribbean societies, and often separations “haunt the literary work” (Scott, 2006, p.17). Mootoo (2005) tackles forbidden love between status unequals in Caribbean societies implying that emotional attachments have priority over class divisions.

Mootoo’s (2005) novel is set on the Caribbean island of Guanagasparr, a fictitious representation of Trinidad, beginning at the onset of World War II. *He Drown She* is a forbidden love story between Indo-Caribbeans of different social classes: upper middle class Rose Sangha Bihar and working class Harry St. George. Rose and Harry become friends when Harry’s mother, Dolly, takes a job as the Sangha’s housekeeper. Mrs. Sangha, in her naiveté, encourages the children to play together allowing their natural inclinations to guide their behavior. Dolly worries that Harry is becoming too comfortable in the Sangha home and with their affluent lifestyle. The Sanghas and St. Georges are “Indians and Indians alike”, but Dolly recognizes their social differences as an unbridgeable gulf (Mootoo, 2005, p.123). Other observers are also concerned with Rose and Harry’s childhood relationship, worrying that it will develop into an adult attachment complicated by class divisions. When the Sangha yardman sees Harry and Rose playing, he warns Harry. “You...is yard boy material. She is the bossman daughter. Oil and water. Never the two shall mix” (Mootoo, 2005, p.126). One night Mr. Sangha arrives at the house finding the children, Rose and Harry, asleep together. He fires Dolly and banishes the St. Georges from his home. Simpson (2007, p.246) believes that Mr. Sangha’s reaction is severe because the “Sangha’s no longer feel an affinity with the poorer class of Indo[-]Caribbeans”. In the Sangha’s newly-constructed social world, “[c]lass distinctions matter” (Simpson, 2007, p.246). As a result of the Sangha’s lack of affiliation with poorer Indo-Caribbeans, Rose and Harry remain separated by class politics until they are adults.

Throughout their early years in Guanagasparr, Harry is a silent constant in Rose’s life. He quietly pursues her, waiting for his

chance to be with her. As an adult, Harry is disappointed when Rose marries Shem Bihar, Harry's former schoolmate. Rose's marriage to Shem makes a socially equitable match and meets the expectations of her parents and friends. Harry brings Rose gifts of eggs when she marries, just as his mother did for Mrs. Sangha, although he is now a successful business owner. The eggs are small tokens of his natural affection for Rose, and she looks forward to any opportunities to interact with Harry. In many ways, this small act of kindness keeps Harry in a lower social position than the Bihars. As a result of Harry's kindness, Shem and the Bihar children refer to him as Eggman, a designation synonymous with the working class and servitude. Despite Harry's success in business and being far-removed from his working class roots, he remains yard boy material in Guanagaspar.

After Dolly's death, Harry immigrates to Canada and becomes a successful landscape designer. His decision to immigrate to Canada is influenced by the country's relaxed social structures. In Canada, success is merit-based affording Harry more opportunities than are available at home. Therefore, Mootoo's (2005) use of Canada as the setting in *He Drown She* for the beginning of Rose and Harry's forbidden love relationship is significant as the stigma of being status unequals is not a conscious concern. In Guanagaspar, Rose and Harry's relationship is bound by social obligations as "living in society" implies "you have no business of your own. Everybody does mind everybody business" (Mootoo, 2005, p.142). In this statement, Mootoo suggests that every action in Guanagaspar is placed under public scrutiny. No Guanagasparian can live on the island exclusive of its rigid social boundaries including injunctions against forbidden love between status unequals.

Guanagaspar's rigid, class-based society is still engrained in Harry's personality although he no longer resides there. Harry's financial success in Guanagaspar and Canada do not alleviate his doubts and feelings of inadequacy, which stem from his working class roots. Harry's discomfort with his working class background affects his ability to engage in a relationship with a woman who is not like him. Harry attempts to have a relationship with Kay, a single Caucasian Canadian, but their interactions are strained by Harry's feelings of inadequacy. Harry's relationship with Kay is challenged from the start because he internalizes his working class roots and is always conscious of their social differences.

Harry is not the only character in the novel harboring feelings of inadequacy. Rose, who is comfortable in different social settings, internalizes Harry's social discomfort. During Harry's interactions with Shem in Canada, Rose is very tense. She worries that working class Harry will embarrass himself in front of Shem with a social faux pas. Although Rose loves Harry, she is concerned with outward appearances and is uncomfortable having a relationship with Harry because he is working class. After returning from Canada, Rose discusses her romance with her maid Piyari. In their conversations, Rose refers to Harry as Eggman or a gardener, not by his name. Rose's decision to discuss the relationship with Piyari rather than with a close friend from her own social circle alludes to her discomfort with publicizing her forbidden love relationship—not solely because it is extramarital, but because Harry is beneath Rose's social class. The politics of class distinctions infiltrate their relationship.

Within the months of Rose's return from Canada, she realizes that she wants to separate from Shem and to have a permanent relationship with Harry. Soon after Christmas, Rose, the self-styled "exemplary wife" fakes her own death to escape from her marriage and to be with Harry (Mootoo, 2005, p.10). By the end of the novel, Rose and Harry flee the island on a homemade boat braving the shifting waters of the Caribbean Sea for the right to love without pressures from society.

Social class is one of the key themes in *He Drown She* and is interconnected with Rose and Harry's forbidden love story as they are status unequals. Rose and Harry are initially forced to separate by her class-conscious father. She is unattainable to Harry and Harry is an unsuitable match because of his working class roots. As Rose approaches a marriageable age, a union with Harry is impossible as it is beneath the Sangha family's expectations for her. Although Rose and Harry mature and become independent of their families, they remain status unequals in Guanagasparian society.

In forbidden love texts, the lovers cross socially established boundaries for their relationships. With the prohibitions placed on violating class boundaries, especially in romantic relationships, this act becomes a social and cultural taboo. However, despite the restrictions placed on socially-imbalanced relationships, attachments crossing social boundaries remain less taboo than relation-

ships crossing racial boundaries — particularly romantic relationships. In interracial forbidden love relationships, racial differences are not considered by the parties who rely solely on their romantic feelings for each other and the attachments they form.

Race plays an important role in determining whether couples in romantic relationships are suitable for each other. In idealized romantic relationships, the possibility of the woman not being Caucasian is rarely considered. Coulthard (1962, p.87) disagrees and provides several examples from Caribbean poetry including works by Émile Roumer and George Campbell in which Afro-Caribbean women are hailed as objects of beauty and presented in a “favourable aesthetic light”. However, a review of regional literature—particularly older texts such as Reid’s (1972) *New Day*, which was originally published in 1949, and De Boissier’s (1931) “The Woman on the Pavement”—dispels Coulthard’s (1962) theory as the texts portray light-complexioned or Caucasian women as objects of beauty and darker-complexioned women as unattractive and unfeminine. A dark-complexioned female is not often the subject of romances, perhaps because she is a threat to the traditional image of Eurocentric beauty. This kind of beauty is not considered the norm as it does not reflect the Western beauty ideal. The same can be said of dark-complexioned men in romances as dark features do not represent the Western ideal of male physical attractiveness. Dark-complexioned men are rarely the subject of romances serving instead as literary monsters in texts such as Shakespeare’s (2009) *Othello* or Aphra Behn’s (1997) *Oroonoko*. In each text, the Black protagonist murders his lover, giving the romantic tale a tragic end and suggesting that even fictional relationships between Caucasian women and men of another race should be aborted. In biracial forbidden love relationships, a male lover is considered unsuitable if he is not Caucasian.

Nunez’s (2006) *Prospero’s Daughter* is a modern, Caribbean take on Shakespeare’s (2008) *The Tempest* in which forbidden love is a central theme. The story takes place on Chacachacare, a small island on the northwest coast of Trinidad. In the novel, Carlos, Nunez’s Caliban, and Virginia, the modern Miranda, fall in love against the wishes of her father, Dr. Peter Gardner, the novel’s Prospero. Although the couple has an emotional attachment and their feelings are reciprocal, there are several barriers to the relationship — the

most significant barrier is race. Carlos is the mixed-race love child of a Caucasian English woman and her Afro-Trinidadian lover, and Virginia is Caucasian and English. Carlos and Virginia have a lot in common and are deeply in love, but Gardner's xenophobic beliefs prevent the couple from openly conducting their relationship.

The novel begins in 1961 during Trinidad's pre-independence period. Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe (1987, p.932) note that pre-independence Trinidad, like many transitional nations in the Caribbean, is a "colour-structured society". This nation's color-consciousness provides a climate for a forbidden love story testing the flexibility of socially-imposed racial boundaries. Nunez's approach to forbidden love and miscegenation is not original; Shakespeare's (2009) *Othello* is a similar tale. The novelty of this forbidden love story involves the position of the Other as a would-be rapist and the Caucasian female as his victim.

Prospero's Daughter begins with an accusation of rape. Carlos asks Gardner for permission to marry Virginia, but is thwarted when Gardner accuses him of raping Virginia. Virginia and Carlos are reared together on Chacachacare without other companions of the same age, living in isolation as victims of Gardner's colonizing project and madness. They take comfort in each other, become attached, and fall in love. Their relationship is conducted clandestinely to prevent Gardner's retaliation as his preconceived notions about people of color guide his treatment of Carlos. For Gardner, Carlos' blackness is a sign of his innate sensuality, which Virginia must be protected against at all costs. Gardner cannot accept that his "English" Virginia, with "English" connoting whiteness, loves the "colored" Carlos (Nunez, 2006, p.94). As a result of Gardner's need to protect Virginia from Carlos, he isolates her then sends her to Trinidad to live with a respected English woman. Once Virginia leaves Chacachacare, Gardner drugs Carlos and tortures him before calling the police to take him to Trinidad.

The implications of fictional portrayals of miscegenation are that the Other, or the person in the relationship who is not a traditional Western representation of beauty, is sensual and prone to concupiscent. If the Other is a Black male, the relationship is complicated with the implied innocence of the Caucasian female. Gardner's faith in Virginia's innocence and his belief that she is also xenophobic leads to his false accusation of rape against Carlos. The implied

innocence of the Caucasian female is a recurrent theme in literature from the southern U.S. and the Caribbean—areas heavily involved in colonization practices and African slavery. The connection between colonization and perceptions of the colonized is based on the shift from “the altruism of the antislavery movement to the cynicism of empire building” (Brantlinger, 1985, p.186).

Brantlinger (1985) notes that Western opinions of the Other were transformed during the colonial period; the imperializing process necessitated adopting a level of inhumanity to Others extending into the next century and permeating societies. In this process of dehumanization, the sexuality of the Other was imbued with an animal-like essence. Carlos, who symbolizes the typical Other, is viewed as possessing an animal-like sensuality. The perception of Carlos’ sensuality leads to his very inhumane torture at Gardner’s hands.

Despite the current shift in public opinion to accepting interracial relationships, stories of Caucasian women loving Black men are still viewed as violating the natural order. There is a persistent belief that Caucasian women in relationships with Black men are more libidinous than Caucasian women in relationships with Caucasian men. The belief also exists that Black men in relationships with Caucasian women are not emotionally attached but covetous of the White body. These slanted beliefs, which incite Gardner to torture Carlos, necessitate the secrecy of Carlos and Virginia’s relationship. Their forbidden love story does have a positive ending as they find the courage to expose their relationship and are eventually married.

Some scholars believe that romantic love is a “social construction specific to Western culture” (Gottschall and Nordlund, 2006, p.450), but the presence of this theme in Caribbean texts provides contradictory evidence. Caribbean societies, although exhibiting some indications of Westernization or Western influences, are hybrid cultures comprised of European, African, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Amerindian traditions. This hybridization could lead to the assumption that forbidden love stories are the region’s cultural inheritance from its various ethnic influences. However, Gottschall and Nordlund (2006, p.454) postulate that romantic love is an “absolute cultural universal” existing in all cultures. Neuroscientific research suggests that romantic love is a neural response present in

all humans rather than strictly culturally influenced (Bartels and Zeki, 2000 cited in Gottschall and Nordlund, 2006, p.451). Romantic love and love attachments are heavily influenced by human emotions. If romantic love is a human emotion, a cultural universal, a neural response, and an absolute, forbidden love, its descendent, is very similar. This statement is not meant to imply that forbidden love is inevitable as neither romantic nor forbidden loves are predictable but the result of a series of elements including emotion and attachment. What can be determined from both the neuroscientific evidence and the commonality of forbidden love stories in many cultures is that these relationships occur despite the presence of any specific cultural, social, familial, or literary influence. Forbidden love is a universal theme as it is an element of a very common human story unaffected by culture, location, or period.

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