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THE RASTAFARIAN: FROM PARIAH TO HERO IN JAMAICAN LITERARY DISCOURSE FROM THE 1950S TO THE 1980S¹

Aart G. Broek
Klasse! Research & Consultancy, Leyden, Netherlands

The early days of the Rastafari movement are rooted in Jamaica in the 1930s, where over the following decades, Rastafarians gradually came to be more positively viewed, especially by the non-propertied classes and a growing number of literary figures. With the rapid rise in the popularity of reggae music around 1970 the Rastafari movement would come to be a powerful symbol of the struggle for justice and against exploitation in Jamaica and beyond. The detested and strange Rastaman prior to 1960 thus became the highly esteemed and prominent Rastaman in the 1970s and 1980s. This social process has been nicely documented; Van Dijk (1993) and Chevannes (1994) being two amongst the scholars who write about this change in appeal and status during the 1990s, by which time it had become obvious to all. It will come as no surprise, then, that this transformation from pariah to hero can also be found in Jamaican literature.

In such novels as *Brother man* (1954) by Roger Mais, *The children of Sisyphus* (1964) by Orlando Patterson, *The late emancipation of Jerry Stover* (1968) by Andrew Salkey, *Escape to Last Man Peak* (1975) by Jean D'Costa, *Ikael Torass* (1976) by N.D. Williams, *The harder they come* (1980) by Michael Thelwell, and *We shall not die* (1983) by Clyde Knight, the Rastafari movement and reggae play a central role. These novels provide a widely divergent view of the Rastafarians and the music associated with them, a view that depends on the changing attitudes toward them by outsiders, including the novelists in question.

The 1950s

Roger Mais is the first West Indian author to introduce a Rastaman as an important character in his novel *Brother man*. The title of Mais' novel refers to John Power, called Bra' Man [=Brother] by everyone. His peace-loving and forgiving attitudes, his selfless desire to help others and his preference for the spiritual instead of the material make Bra' Man an eccentric person in the eyes of his fellow barrack yard residents. However, Bra' Man inspires so much awe among his neighbors that they come to him, in secret, for help in times of sickness and financial difficulty. Nonetheless, when

¹ Based on Broek, 2000: 119-145, with a touch of Broek, 2014 and 2017; translated from the Dutch by Scott Rollins with the author.

tragedy hits – in the form of a murder and police raids – the neighborhood directly accuses Bra' Man of being the guilty party. All their pent up hate, horror, ignorance and fear is directed at the Rastaman. He is stoned, a punishment that nearly costs him his life. For three days he lies on the brink of death. No matter how full of hate his environment may be, Bra' Man is portrayed as someone who has the capacity to forgive his assailants after the stoning. In fact, he emerges as the only one to choose the righteous path in the struggle for daily survival: that of understanding, trust and surrender when it comes to his fellow human beings and fellow sufferers of oppression.

The Jesus-like idealization of Bra' Man as a Rastafarian is clear in this story line, even for readers without specific knowledge of this movement. Idealization brings with it inevitable distortions. The most striking aspect of the idealization of the Rastafarians can be attributed not so much the infallible character of Bra' Man, as to the novel's silence regarding two very important aspects of Rastafarian religious creed, namely the belief that Haile Selassie I is the only true and (at the time) living God, and the belief that all African descended people in the diaspora will return to Africa, to Ethiopia, their supposed mother country. Bra' Man is first and foremost a Rastafarian through his actions, personal manner and his Biblically oriented thinking. But even in this, Bra' Man distinguishes himself from what has by now become the stereotypical Rastafarian. That he does not use marihuana does not necessarily have to come as a surprise, but what is remarkable is that 'the herb' in *Brother man* is given strongly negative connotations; the murder at the center of the story and certain acts (fraud, gambling) that are diametrically opposed to the ideals for which Bra' Man stands, are all directly related to the use of marihuana.

The motivation behind this idealization becomes clear against the backdrop of the relationship between Rastafarians and outsiders, such as Roger Mais himself. From its beginnings in the 1930s, prevailing Jamaican public opinion towards the Rastafarian movement had been characterized by loathing, fear, violence, oppression, and ignorance, as summed up by Jamaican sociologist and Rastafarian Semaj 1985: 'The damn Rasta dem, wey de Rasta dem want, we just put dem out in the sea and sink the boat – say dem want to go Africa!' (Semaj, 1985: 9).

The positive images that Mais presents of the Rastafarians in *Brother man* appear to contrast sharply with the accepted views of his day. What comes to the fore from this contrast is on the one hand, criticism of the existing attitudes towards being a Rastafarian, and on the other understanding for the way of life of this marginalized social group. Given the aggressively negative attitudes of his day, it is understandable why Mais withholds from his readers some of the most controversial elements of the Rastafari movement. Mais thus takes care not to have his Rastaman associated in any manner with marihuana, so as not to undermine the force of his arguments, which were already to some extent hampered by Mais' limited knowledge of Rastafarian doctrine, which at the time was anything but well-understood.

In the 1950s *Brother man* articulated the feelings of a small group who sympathized with the Rastafarians. Research on the movement indicates that the first and very acrimonious phase in the relationship between Rastafarians and outsiders – that of *the damn Rasta dem* – lasts until the 1960s, after which a certain cautious swing of opinion sets in. Alongside the aggressively unpopular attitudes towards Rastafarians that persist and are sustained by governmental authorities, some intellectuals, such as Smith, Augier & Nettleford (1960) and Barrett (1968) exhibit more sympathy, and open up a space for a more well-grounded discussion of the Rastafari movement.

The 1960s

In the 1960s Patterson and Salkey turn their attention to the Rastafari movement in *The children of Sisyphus* and *The late emancipation of Jerry Stover*, respectively. Both novels are representative examples of the attitudes that prevailed among outsiders during that decade: on the one hand, interest, understanding and insight and on the other doubts and criticism.

Patterson depicts the lives of various characters from the Dungle, at the time a rather extensive, open air garbage dump just outside of Kingston, in which the inhabitants built their provisional barracks and huts. They had been forced to do so because the city proper could not process the huge influx of people from the countryside. Patterson portrays these people in their attempt to escape from, in the first words of the novel: the 'worthless, lousy, dirty life' they lead. Among these lives, he focuses on those of young Dinah, of Mary and her daughter Rosetta, and of Brother Solomon and his group of Rastas, all of whom are striving to achieve a better life.

For Brother Solomon and his group a better life means the realization of their wish to go back to the Rastafarian land of origin, Ethiopia. Patterson thus presents us with a decidedly different view of the Rastafarian movement than Mais did. Bra' Man was an eccentric and was despised by his fellow victims of oppression. The Rastafarians in *The children of Sisyphus* constitute a group and in fact only distinguish themselves from their companions in misfortune in the Dungle through the ideal they strive to achieve. In this, the novel closely follows the changing status of Rastafarians in Jamaican society in the 1960s, when support from the lower socioeconomic echelons – particularly the young – grows steadily.

Though the influence of the Rastafari may have grown, Rastafarians are in no way the respected pioneers they would become in the eyes of many in the 1970s (Barrett, 1977; Nettleford, 1970; Owens, 1976). Patterson treats the Rastafari movement with an unusually high level of understanding by providing, in an unassuming way, a remarkably large amount of information about the ritual use of marijuana and meditation gatherings. In this regard, Patterson articulates some of the sentiments of his time, as he does in his ultimately ironic treatment of certain articles of Rastafarian faith, especially their desire to return to Ethiopia. Patterson depicts the Rastafarians as simple souls who upon hearing the 'news' that a ship bound for the motherland is on its way, want to swim out to meet it and, if necessary, swim all the way to Africa. This news turns out to be nothing but rumors, and the Rastafarians find themselves at the end of the novel in the same miserable situation where they were at the beginning.

Patterson's criticism goes even further. Neither Dinah nor Mary and her daughter Rosetta succeed in escaping the Dungle. Nevertheless, their failure is clearly attributed to external factors beyond their control, such as unemployment, racial discrimination, and abuse of power. The failure of the Rastas, however, is attributed to themselves. Patterson shows understanding for the Rastafarians through his reliable descriptions but he is extremely negative in his ultimate verdict on the movement, ridiculing one of its most important tenets. This attitude of skepticism among the more privileged social groups who do not belong to stratum of the shanty-town dwellers dominates until the end of the 1960s, as demonstrated in Salkey's *The late emancipation of Jerry Stover*.

Salkey's novel depicts the life of Jerry Stover that is characterized by boredom, listlessness, and nonchalance. Jerry is searching for his future, for himself, his values and security in the Rastafari

movement. He comes from a middle-class family, has a solid formal education and does not suffer much in the way of material need, in stark contrast with the Rasta group he considers joining, which resides in the Dungle. Despite his many activities on their behalf, such as helping to organize a peaceful demonstration, writing a petition, giving lessons to children and adults, Jerry ultimately does not join the Rastafari movement. At the end of the book Jerry is still a man in search of a goal in life. Vacillating attitudes with regard to Rastafarians in the 1960s are what come to the fore in Salkey's novel, where it initially seems possible to find 'meaning in life' through Rastafarianism, but ultimately it becomes clear that this is not the case. This impossibility is very dramatically and emphatically expressed at the end of the novel, when members of the group of Rastas are buried under a thick layer of stones during an earthquake.

The 1970s

Along with the reggae music associated with it (see Bilby, 1985; Clarke, 1980) the Rastafari movement began its triumphal procession through Jamaican society in the 1970s. In the novels of Jamaican authors Rastafarians and reggae assumed much more favorable depictions than ever before and in poetry and pop songs expressions of praise intended for Rastafarians and their views became massively popular. In this decade there was an enormous spread of the ideas, ideals and particularly the symbols of the Rastafari movement, such as *dreadlocks*, I-tal food, reggae music, *ganja*, and the red-black-green-yellow color combination of the Ethiopian flag.

Although this certainly did not mean that 'everybody turned Rasta', Rastafarian influence dramatically increased among all socio-economic strata of the Afro-Caribbean communities in Jamaica and the rest of the West Indies as well as among West Indians in the diaspora (Cashmore, 1983). As tolerance for and interest in Rastafarianism grew, the movement became a symbol of home-grown and independent development not only in the socio-cultural sphere, but ultimately also in economic and political areas. Even though this did not lead to the transformation of Jamaica into Sion, Rastafarians were no longer demonized, especially after gaining positive acknowledgement by Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley (1972-1980) and their virtual canonization by reggae superstar Bob Marley.

With the Rastafari movement as its central theme, N.D. Williams' novel *Ikael Torass*, was published in 1976. In Andrew Salkey's 1968 novel, Jerry Stover seeks a foothold and goal in life with the Rastafarians but in the end he fails to do so. A decade later the main character in Williams' *Ikael Torass* fares quite differently. At the beginning of the novel Michael is on the verge of leaving his native land of British Guyana in order to go and study at the regional university in Jamaica. Saying farewell and leaving his country was not easy but after some delay Michael nevertheless departs.

Once in Jamaica, he begins his university studies, but the novel is anything but the story of a successful student. On the contrary, *Ikael Torass* is the story of Michael's growing awareness of the hypocrisy of Jamaican society, university education included. On the one hand, he sees a small elite class of West Indians (including the students) who accept and propagate western, political, economic and cultural hegemony in the region, while on the other hand he sees a considerably larger group of West Indians who live in abject poverty and who do their utmost merely to survive. Rastafarians belong to this group, as do the majority of those who sympathize with them.

At a certain moment Michael comes into contact with one of them. He has joined a student demonstration, without actually knowing exactly what is being demonstrated against. He has lost all sympathy with the students and university; he is filled with disgust and looks for a way out. It is precisely at that moment that a Rasta sympathizer lends him a helping hand. Mesmerized by the reggae music coming from a portable radio, Michael is led away by him from the demonstration into the world of the Rastafarians and other marginalized people. This marks the start of an entirely new and extremely beneficial life experience for Michael. He grows increasingly estranged from his middle-class upbringing and ideals. The confrontation with the daily life of the residents in the barrack yards opens his eyes to how the Jamaican elites neglect and oppress them. Michael emerges from this 'spiritual immersion' with a new identity and – symbolic of this change – a new name, Ikael Torass.

The 'I' in Haile Selassie I is supposed to be pronounced as the first person 'I'. Rastafarians used this 'I' usually in place of the first syllable of other words, for example I-cient (ancient), I-tal (vital), I-quality (equality), and so Ikael for Michael, in order to underscore his bond with the Rastafaris. Torass is a contraction of 'to your ass', a term of abuse, aimed in this case against Babylon, against Western hegemony. The contrast between Jerry and Ikael is evident, and through Ikael, Williams responds critically to how his predecessors expressed their views towards the Rastafari movement.

The euphoric mood in which Ikael finds himself at the end of the novel notwithstanding, his future remains undiscussed. To what degree the Rastafari movement would actually be able to bring about the desired transformation of Jamaican society was a question first posed with a degree of urgency at the outset of the 1980s, when pro-Western Prime Minister Edward Seaga swept Manley from the political stage. This made the issue 'Can Rasta deliver?' more pressing. At the time Ikael Torass was published there was no doubt that the answer to this question was 'Yes'.

With this novel we are far removed from Mais' *Brother man*. The Rastaman has become a hero, a paragon, a source of inspiration. This image is not only met with in literature for adults, but also in literature for children. Jean D'Costa's *Escape to Last Man Peak* (1975) depicts a group of children fleeing from an epidemic. During their adventurous trek right across Jamaica it is a Rastaman who provides them with food, water and shelter at a crucial moment. For D'Costa's children Rasta epitomizes Good.

The 1980s

By the 1980s, there had been an undeniable growth in the number of followers of the Rastafari movement. Of greater appeal than their religious doctrine, however, were the symbols, freedoms (such as the smoking of *ganja*), and reggae music associated with the Rastafarians. These symbols, freedoms, and music began more and more to lead a life of their own at the end of the 1970s, separate from the Rastafari faith. The belief in Rastafari was relegated to the background and was overshadowed by the rasta-style, extolled in the novel *The harder they come* (1980), which was preceded by the movie of the same name. In the meantime, reggae music was surpassed in popularity by that dub poets and the precursors of rap (Habekost, 1993).

The harder they come is the fictionalized biography of Rhygin, a legendary rudeboy and folk hero who lived in and around Kingston at the end of the 1950s. We follow Rhygin's exciting transformation from country boy to city 'ganja dealer and reggae star'. In the end Rhygin's

rebelliousness causes him to be declared an outlaw by the authorities, but at the same time to be declared a beloved hero by the people who take his fate to heart. In the novel the song 'The harder they come' makes Rhygin popular, the song that in Jamaica (and far beyond) was sung into the hit parade by rudeboy Jimmy Cliff. The song is a homage to the rebellious lifestyle and contentious politics depicted in the novel, and an expression of aspects of the ideology that underpins that lifestyle and those politics:

Talk about the pie up in the sky
Waiting for me when I die
But between the day you born and when you die,
Dey never seem to hear you when you cry...

So, as sure as the sun will shine
I'm gonna get my share now... what's mine
And then, the harder dey come
Is the harder dey fall
One an' all.

The response of Western hegemony to this lifestyle and politics is depicted in Clyde Knight's *We shall not die* (1983). A few months before Ronald Reagan, then President of the United States, acted on what he felt was his right and obligation to invade the Caribbean island of Grenada, Clyde Knight's novel *We shall not die* appeared. What exactly Reagan said during the preparations for the invasion is not yet part of the public record. But his words could have been similar to those that Knight has the American president say in his novel, in response to a fictional revolutionary threat to US domination in Jamaica: "No Buts! We are going in there. Now, get on that line and tell them we are coming to their aid, whether they like it or not. And you," he said to his Defense Secretary, "get busy organizing for troops to fly in."

In this novel, Knight has a large group of well-organized Jamaicans revolt against the oppressive Jamaican regime at the end of the 1970s. The airport, radio stations and other important buildings are occupied, and a number of American bauxite executives are taken hostage. The Jamaican government does not immediately strike back for fear that ruling class Americans might be killed. The American president has less of a problem with that. What he takes 'American interests' to mean are not the five American hostages, but instead US control over the land and labor of the Jamaican people. 'You expect us to give up millions of dollars' worth of land and investments just because a bunch of hooligans demand that we do so,' Knight has the American president say.

The American invasion puts a bloody end to a frantic attempt at land reform, a more just division of wealth in Jamaica and efforts to throw off the shackles of poverty. The book ends with the invasion, preceded by an extensive description of the organization that leads the revolt. The invasion may have put down the revolt, but not the resistance. The dying words Knight has his hero utter are: 'We shall be back, we shall not die.' These are also the closing words of this rather grim novel about a much grimmer reality.

In *We Shall Not Die*, this reality is evoked time and again in just a few lines of reggae lyrics, such as those from the following song 'Soul power' by the Heptones:

Now I will not hide my feelings no more, oh no, oh no,
We want the right to live like free men
But poverty is all we feel
Now I will not hide my feelings no more.

He who is less than just, is less than man
It is only by justice that we can authentically
Measure man's value or his nullity.
People see me acting strange
They may think it's a burning shame,
But they don't seem to realize the pangs of
Hell that I feel.

In Knight's novel it is the lyrics to this reggae song that give the main character just that little nudge necessary to kick start his existing dissatisfaction into action, and he proceeds to set up an extensive resistance group against exploitation and oppression. Although the revolutionaries do not necessarily identify as Rastafarians, they embody the self-confidence and the rejection of social injustice (Babylon) associated with Rastafarians, their lifestyle and their music.

In the second half of the 1980s, however, 'the pangs of hell that I feel' were not actually transformed into organized resistance. In hindsight, this could hardly be expected of the Rastafari movement, which was characterized by a high degree of disorganization and an equal degree of ideological division (Barnett, 2005). Its foundational premises seemed insufficient to support substantial changes in society in general or even at the interpersonal level of relations between the sexes in particular (Lake, 1994). '[The] revolutionary potential of the Rastafari movement,' Van Dijk concluded in his doctoral dissertation, '[appears] practically totally gone.' The answer to the question 'Can Rasta deliver?' is that it may have (had) the potential to, but it did not, at least not by the closing decade of the twentieth century. Knight's *We shall not die* is to some extent emblematic of this impotence: Rastafarianism and reggae may have been inspirational but ultimately did not deliver in practical terms. The final words of Knight's hero, though, suggest, as does Barnett (2012), that not all hope is lost as we enter the new millennium.

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