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The Coloured Girl in the Ring: A Guyanese Woman Remembers is a fictional exploration of a young Black woman's coming of age in British Guiana of the late fifties and early sixties. Told against the backdrop of political and racial turbulence, the novel employs a first-person narrative format and proffers a well defined portrait of the main character's recollection of her family life, her oppressive school teachers, her friends' doomed inter-racial romance and her thoughts on race and identity. As the central character matures, she faces painful choices about her future and her need to explore the world around her. Colourful local characters, careful twists, and vivid descriptions of British Guianese life combine to render an original portrayal of the Caribbean woman's transition into adulthood.

Brenda DoHarris was born in British Guiana, now the independent territory of Guyana, where she grew up. She is a professor of English at Bowie State University in Bowie, Maryland and a graduate of Columbia University and Howard University where she received the PhD in English. The first Guyanese woman to run in Guyana for office of presidency of a trades union, she became actively involved in the Guyanese political movement for democracy during the seventies. She has travelled widely in Africa, the Caribbean and China where she attended the U.S.\China Joint Conference on Women's Issues. Her area of scholarly interest is post-colonial women's literature.

I have read this book 5 times, and each time I give more kudos to Ms. Doharris - a true Guyanese. She has captured the true essence of the "happenings" during that era in Guyana, one I can wholeheartedly relate to, especially of Kitty the city I was born and grew up around. Her dialogue brought back so many funny and sad childhood memories; it was however a great place to grow up. As you read this story, an image appears coupled with our "tantalizing" speaking dialogue and island music. This should be made into a Guyanese movie. I have encouraged many of my Guyanese Friends to read this book, and given it to several of my "American generation family" of children to help them understand the atmosphere that we of the 40's, 50's, 60's and early 70's grew up in. They will never know the "Beautiful Guyana" of that era. Congrats to Ms. Doharris. I eagerly await her next novel.

Although the main title of Ms. DoHarris's novel is taken from a rather innocent and playful game that children play, her book, a fictionalised autobiography, is quite the opposite: a profoundly insightful study of life in Guyana, from 1958 to 1964, when the narrator was at secondary school.
Whether one regards A Coloured Girl in the Ring as novel or autobiography, it provides a brilliant and memorable evocation of familiar sights, sounds and scents in colonial Guyana, and of the country’s history, geography, sociology, politics, major personalities and commonest events, all densely crowded around a story about the narrator’s family, friends and neighbours, and most of all about the narrator herself.

Using a method of itemising, cataloguing or listing which is found in one of the earliest of English novels, Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, DoHarris assiduously researches, collects and records names, places and events that we instinctively remember from Guyana of the 1950s: not only common items of food like coague, sugar cake and rice pap, dumplings, fufu or black pudding, but furniture like the Berbice chair, Morris chair, chiffonier, the Phillips radio with Sarah Vaughan singing "My Tormented Heart", calypsonians singing "All Day All Night Miss Mary Ann", and Lighthouse cigarettes, Nugget shoe polish and Reckitt's Crown blue.

In a magisterial description of Stabroek market, nearly a page long, and paralleled only by a similar passage in Jan Carew’s novel Black Midas, DoHarris itemises everything from dray carts and Bookers taxis to mangoes, mittai, cassava pone and genips, stinkin’ toe, pointer brooms and trusted medications like Dodd’s Kidney Pills, Sloan’s Liniment, and DeWitt’s pills (pp.187-188).

It is when DoHarris writes phrases like "Afta rall" for "after all", or sentences like "Wake up yuh lazy behine an’ bring dung de posy" (p.99), heightened by idiomatic expressions like "yuh cork duck" (p.91) or "time longer than twine" (p.130) that she captures the accent, rhythm and intonation of authentic Guyanese speech which makes her recorded vision of 1950s Guyana materialise, like film, before our very eyes.

But if this vision appears idyllic or nostalgic, it is not the whole truth: the central theme in DoHarris’s novel is that she – the coloured or brown girl – is entrapped in a ring of deprivation and exploitation in colonial Guyana, and that her chief aim is: "to escape the ring, to go abroad and seek education beyond the mudflat" (p.137); for the larger truth is that all Guyanese, including her parents, friends and neighbours are encircled in a ring of poverty and deprivation created by colonialism and geared to their own self-destruction.

Of the narrator’s neighbours, Mr. Braithwaite is a drunkard who kicks his family out; Misses Ada, Ida and Edna hold body and soul together by making and selling black pudding; Gatha is jilted and left with child by the policeman Eustace; Eustace meanwhile loves Shirley, a striptease dancer who is first mauled by her lover’s wife, and later murdered by Eustace; while Eustace, later still, commits suicide by throwing himself in front of a moving train.

Like the narrator, Ragunandan’s daughter Drupattie wins a scholarship to secondary school, but when she falls in love with Steven Osbourne, an African boy, racist objections by her family force her into an arranged Indian marriage that ends her academic career. Steven is later beaten by Indians, and Drupattie’s uncle is stabbed, presumably by Africans, such crude and violent actions being mere symptoms of the deep-seated ethnic rivalry between Africans and Indians that eventually leads to politically-inspired riots, killings of both Africans and Indians by each other, and widespread destruction in Guyana, in 1962. In the end, it is the village madwoman Banga Mary who provides perhaps the best summary of such self-destruction: "One day race hate will make this country choke in its own blood" (p.197).

This is one of several instances where DoHarris breaks the strict, chronological sequence of her narrative another is when she later meets Steven Osbourne in New York to extract profound pathos from characters, women as well as men, who display heroic, unyielding willpower to struggle against the ring of colonialism that encircles them.

DoHarris strikes gold with such pathos, and when it is added to her brilliant evocation of colonial Guyana, we know it is a vein of pure Guyanese gold; for her portrait of her father reading Shakespeare’s sonnets in a forest coincides exactly with Edgar Mittelholzer’s portrait of
characters in his novel Shadows Move Among Them listening to European, classical music in the same Guyanese forest.

Sometimes the simplest of plots, well cultivated, often yield valuable returns of great morals and lessons to follow. As in Hemmingway's Old Man and the Sea, For Whom the Bell Tolls, and The Snows of Kilimanjaro, and equally so in Steinbeck's The Pearl, The Grapes of Wrath, and Los Pasturas De La Cielo. The main plot of The Coloured Girl in the Ring tells the simple story of an anonymous girl, identifiably colored and Guyanese, of equally anonymous parentage (also born and bred from the bowels and bosom of BG), growing up to physical and mental maturity during the most turbulent and traumatic period in the history of the colony, and how she broke out from the stifling ring of poverty and racial insularity that gripped the country in the late fifties and early sixties. The "Ring", having a double symbol: that from which she yearned to break out; and the other, that she dreamed to enter. A ring that the East Indian girl, Drupattie and her Black boyfriend (in one of the subsidiary plots) dreamed of, but never really materialized, a ring that everyone believed only existed far from the 'mudflats' of the colony, only reachable by skipping across the ocean, tra la la la la. A mockingly, laughable dream of a ring that no one really achieved. A dream not really realized by the protagonist (or the author) for despite achieving her life-long desire to leave the shores, and having attained great educational and professional heights in Washington, she still wrote (unconsciously) with nostalgia of the Demerara dew, the Demerara shadows, the Demerara breeze as if part of her remained in Demerara. Nor Steven despite his PhD and big Commonwealth job, he has four failed marriages and drank (like his father). A dream of Ragunand'an daughter, Drupattie, going abroad and becoming a doctor, demolished into the drudgery of domesticity.

The major characters are developed with a dramatic flair. As the events unfold they change; for better or for worse. Even the protagonist's father, always indomitable, falls and is "swallowed up by the cavernous mouth of the Mazaruni and he was no longer part of us". Eustace the policeman falls to murder and suicide, a victim of his own flamboyant folly. Only the women grew stronger, even Shirley, seen by some as "part of the great Black unwashed" was perceived by the protagonist, "like a sakkiwinki...to soar above the tightening circle [ring], to live her life as she saw fit, giving full vent to her emotions, free of the restraints the middle class imposed on themselves" But she was restrained all right; by the circumstances of time and place. She too, lived in a surrealistic "ring". Of time;&she was practicing an independence that was not yet born, so she had to die. Of place;&she spoke with, "something in her voice, the yawning distance in her eyes; as though she had entered some strange foreign country across the ocean where she could not be reached." Die she did. A martyr? Maybe a heroine. Shirley had in life and words and in death, taught the protagonist things the classroom could not. The real villain is Balgobin. From a hard-working milkman being chased by pre-dawn dogs, we see, as events unfold, his personality emerging as one frozen in primitive cultural patterns, an evil omen whose spirit runs throughout the book, the epitome of racism, sexism and greed. His number should have been 0666, not the badge number of policeman, Eustace. He effectively destroyed the lives of Drupattie and Steven, and poisoned many others. But his villaininess was probably superseded by that of the 'Kabaka' who was subtly alluded to be behind the violence, burning and looting in Georgetown.

Written in standard English, the dialogues generally are Guyanese in dialect and uniquely in Georgetown vernacular. The author goes even further in her linguistics in being able to present the different inflections of different ethnic/geographic/economic groups. Hence we are able to observe the difference in the way the people from Georgetown speak from that of the Corentyne, or the way East Indians say "gyal", Blacks, "gyurl", and the white colonialists, "gehl". But a special flavor, distinctly Guyanese, like pepperpot, souse and black-pudding, a flavor which cannot be provided by standard English, is the prolific use of Guyanese proverbs and colloquialisms which not only bring out the intimacy and cultural uniqueness of the people, but takes many a reader (outside Guyana) back reminiscently to a time and place this way of speech was common. You cannot help being transported to Guyana when you hear 'rass', 'kunumunu', 'eye-pass', 'pork-knocker', 'typee', 'kyat eat alyou dinner', 'overdo de do', 'tek she belly an mek buryin grung'. In addition, the author further enriches the Guyanese vernacular by creating her own Guyanese metaphors, similes, symbols, images, idioms and other figures of speech, such as "stream of blood snaked like a black camoudi, stung his pride like a deep, lingering marabunta bite, his voice cut the silence like her sharp black
pudding knife, Steven skipped softly out of our circle [ring] and across the ocean to England, visitor from Red China. Note the contrasting image in, “tenderly nursing a warm enamel cup...she then pushed open and propped up a few more Demerara windows...settled her large posterior into the comfortable Berbice chair...she followed the fortunes of the (foreign) radio soap opera heroin, Portia, in the serial Portia Faces Life”. Other recurring symbols such as the stray dogs keep chasing Balgobin, and blue-eyed Jesus looking down (chastisingly) from the almanac in Edna's kitchen, tell of the inferiority (feelings) of the laboring class. And carrion crows circling the coconut trees, while the neighbor's radio played Nat king Cole's non dimenticar, tell of impending death.

There are several lessons to be learned: one can be a supporter of the "Chief" and still take, "a stern view of looting and pillage" as in the case of the protagonist's mother; there is a serious lesson to be learned about sexual promiscuity and the fate that follows, and that marriage is more sacred than just placing a ring on one's finger; education may not necessarily remove racial prejudice&150;both the illiterate Balgobin and the London trained 'Kabaka' were equally guilty. And that while ethnic differences always existed, racial violence was seeded, germinated, watered and cultivated by the political events after 1955. In other words Guyana's racial problem is not an historical one but a political one; and, is there really a "ring" or a silver lining that one can reach by skipping across the ocean? In Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Pecola prayed every night for blue eyes. In her eleven years no one had ever noticed her. But with her blue eyes, she thought, everything would be different. She would be so pretty that her parents (the races) would stop fighting. Her father would stop drinking. Her brother would stop running away. If only she could be beautiful. If only people would look at her. When someone finally did, it was her father, drunk. He raped her. In Hemmingway's Old Man and the Sea, the old man made the greatest sacrifice (three days and three nights at sea) to bring in the largest fish ever, only to be robbed of it by sharks. And to add insult to injury, the sophisticated, capitalistic, American tourists, looked at the totally devoured skeleton and called that the shark Similarly, in Steinbeck's The Pearl Kino having found the largest pearl, which the thought would solve all his material and social problems, eventually threw it back into the ocean.

But the most serious lesson is sad one. One of lack of empathy. We have been made to see that while Blacks and Indians have lived next door to each other for near two hundred years, worked side by side while their children played with each other, while the two races mixed in many ways, they never really knew each other. There was no real empathy between the races. What was it they ate, how they ate it, using what wares and cutlery, how was it cooked, how was it earned? Did they also hurt and cry &150; and bleed? Did they offer each other or ask of each other food, clothing or financial help for funerals, sicknesses, etc? What words comprise their cultural vernacular? Do Indians really know about 'child-father, que-que, bambye, fufu'; and do Blacks understand simple Hindi and Arabic terms commonly used in the Guyanese household?

Finally, is the author's voice, personality, opinion or judgment seen in the novel? Without doubt there is a strong pride in being Guyanese, Black and professional woman. She is proud of her parentage and recognizes the sacrifices they made to make her what she became. Like Grace Nichols in her book, Whole of a Morning Sky, DoHarris does not commit herself to make an opinion or judgment about the violence of the sixties. While she is traumatized by the tragedy of Steven and her best friend, Drupattie, she refrains from voicing an opinion on the sensitive issue of inter-racial marriage. Is the author weak or does she have a high sense of moral value? Does she have her head in the sand?

The Coloured Girl in the Ring is really a tragedy of many lives broken and lost as a result of colonial oppression and the racial conflicts of the sixties. But most of all it's a tragedy of a nation that cannot unite and must inevitably face demise. Hence, I feel the novel should have ended at the peak of emotion, at the point where Steven drains his glass and someone inside the 'Kaieteur' restaurant in Washington puts on Eddie Hooper's Passing Memories. The flashbacks of the following two chapters should have preceded this event.


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A few years ago when I came across Brenda Chester DoHarris’s The Coloured Girl in the Ring: A Guyanese Woman Remembers, I intended to read it, but never got around to it. Honestly, there was just something about the title that turned me off ever so slightly. No, it wasn’t the word “coloured.” Maybe it was the remembrance of playing ring games that I felt a little too nostalgic about to get into at the time. I’m not quite sure what it was.

So with over-long honor, I am finally reading Coloured Girl. What’s more, I intend to use it in my composition / reading courses next semester. I’ll recommend it to my colleagues as well. You see, now that I’m on a mission to get Guyanese writers read, the road to accomplishing that goal is so clear to me. It’s a long road, but I’m excited to journey along it.

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