

Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Wilson Harris (1921- )", in *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, vol. 1, ed. Eugene Benson & L.W. Conolly (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 632-634.

**HARRIS, WILSON** (1921- )

*Guyanese novelist*

Born in New Amsterdam, Guyana, he worked for many years as a surveyor in the South American interior. He immigrated to England in 1959 and married Margaret Whitaker, a Scottish writer. They lived for more than twenty years in London before moving to Essex. His experience in the rain forest greatly influenced his perception of the spirit of place in a land repeatedly invaded and peopled by different races. London provided the setting for the novels he wrote in the late 1970s and 1980s, although like the Guyanese novels, they illustrate the cross-culturalism of which he was one of the earliest exponents.

Harris' considerable opus — nineteen novels,

two volumes of novellas, four of criticism, and many essays — presents an unending exploration of humanity's psyche in dialogue with its eclipsed ancestry, with the landscape (a 'living text'), and with the vanished peoples — Amerindians and slaves — of Guyana's tragic past. His work explores humanity's inexhaustible potential for creativity and is an 'unfinished genesis of the imagination' whose regeneration, the central theme of all his fiction, he sees as the answer to the crises of the contemporary world. His novels range from the re-creation of the 'New World' conquest to the fictionalization of astronomical features, such as black holes, and quantum physics in an attempt to reconcile art and science and convey a perception of reality in keeping with our present-day understanding of the universe. They present humanity as capable of great imaginative and intellectual daring yet also very limited by a one-track mind and will-to-power.

Unlike V. S. Naipaul, who sees western myths as alien and irrelevant to the Caribbean because they are incompatible with its allegedly unheroic past, Harris sees them as the legacy of a common human ancestry and has re-created many of them through local personae in a Caribbean setting. His first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), the opening book of the *Guyana Quartet*, fictionalizes the West Indian and European myth of El Dorado, using it as a metaphor for the conquest of the 'new' world, the meeting between Europeans and dispossessed Amerindians, and the symbolic re-enactment of all conquering expeditions into the heartland of Guyana. The main character, Donne, evokes at once Renaissance ambition and the poet's imagination (**Derek Walcott's** 'ancestral murderers and poets'), which could have produced a new kind of society. With his multiracial crew Donne pursues Amerindians on a dangerous river to get cheap labour for his plantation. Most of the crew die, and when Donne reaches the waterfall above which his Amerindian

mistress and her people have taken refuge, the narrative is transformed into a visionary sequence in which Donne becomes at last fully conscious of the hell he has built. The resurrected crew and the Amerindian people are momentarily united in the 'Palace of the Peacock' and an alternative to disaster and enmity is offered through consciousness and imagination. By breaking the mould of ingrained prejudice and stasis, in spite of, and through, the resulting void, Harris suggests that the catastrophic past offered a largely neglected potential for reconciliation and development. He differs from other Caribbean writers in rejecting the notion of a distinct West Indian identity, which he considers as partial and limited.

Together with the *Quartet's* other novels, *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961), *The Whole Armour* (1962), and *The Secret Ladder* (1963), *Palace of the Peacock* emphasizes the need for a genuine multiracial community. Harris also differs from many Caribbean writers by rejecting realism because it is inadequate to render the 'dismembered psychical world' of the Caribbean and 'persuades' the reader that the selected elements it presents (historical and social situations, manners, fashionable conventions, and even moral attitudes) belong to an inevitable order of things.

After *Heartland* (1964), a sequel to the *Quartet*, his fiction — *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (1965), *The Waiting Room* (1967), *Tumatumari* (1968), *Ascent to Omai* (1970), and *Companions of the Day and Night* (1975) — becomes increasingly self-reflexive. It shows a double preoccupation with the state of loss incurred in the past and the kind of fiction the artist-narrator-protagonist attempts to conceive. The dynamic behind these novels is one of 're-vision' of both content and form as Harris creates a 'fiction that consumes its own biases': re-vision of an individual and historical past; re-vision of the make-up of characters, who form a nucleus of selves and are 'agents of personality' through whom the past is re-enacted

while they progress by intuitive thrusts rather than participation in a conventional plot; re-vision also of their mode of perception and style through 'convertible imageries', protean metaphors whose meanings change with the protagonist's altering vision. This was to lead to 'the novel as painting' as illustrated in *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* (1977) and its sequel *The Tree of the Sun* (1978), in which painting is an exploratory metaphor to grasp the 'inimitable'.

After *The Sleepers of Roraima* (1970) and *The Age of the Rainmakers* (1971), which reinterpret Amerindian myths and show that myth, as opposed to historiography, is a carrier of renewal and can 'breach the mimicry of fact', *Black Marsden* (1972) and *The Angel at the Gate* (1982) are informed by an inner movement towards otherness, though Harris always carefully shows that the deprived 'other' can become possessive in turn and dangerously hypnotic. The quest in which his characters are involved leads to disorientation and uncertainty as positive prerequisites to the transformation of the characters' apprehension of events. The narratives follow a pattern of dislocation and reconstruction, not in a linear process but in a canvas of partial crumbings interwoven with partial re-visions. The traditional forms of allegory, comedy, tragedy, and epic are also revised, particularly in his latest trilogy, *Carnival* (1985), *The Infinite Rehearsal* (1987), and *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (1990). The 'carnival' of individual life and history with its interplay of hiding and revelation is a 'divine comedy of existence' that shows the Inferno (here of the middle passage but also of the modern industrial state), Purgatorio, and Paradiso not as separate finite states but as fluid, overlapping categories, while 'carnival' allows for the repeated partial unmasking of the contradictory faces of reality. *The Infinite Rehearsal*, a phrase that epitomizes Harris' writing process and has greatly influenced recent post-colonial criticism, is a spiritual autobi-

ography that 'rewrites' Goethe's *Faust* (associated with Quetzalcoatl) and presents the survival of modern civilization and the conception of a new kind of fiction as aspects of the same allegorical quest. *The Four Banks of the River of Space* explores the creative and regenerating potential of epic and myth as the figure of Ulysses, once a great and vengeful hero, is fragmented into several figures whose revisionary self-analysis makes more conciliating.

The originality of Harris' writing lies not only in his thought-provoking fiction but in his use of language and symbolism, the poetic density of his narratives, and their rich intertextual allusions. Like the masterpieces he revises, they are rooted in the 'unconscious' and the 'universal' imagination. The deep and genuine cross-culturalism of his writing makes him hard to classify. He belongs with the great innovators who make us look at our world in a new light and see it as a global landscape in which conflicts are interdependent but can only be solved through the individual consciousness and imagination.

HENA MAES-JELINEK

Further reading: Hena Maes-Jelinek, ed., *Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination* (1991).