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EXOTIC BEACHES/EROTIC BODIES: A REVIEW OF OONYA KEMPADOO'S *TIDE RUNNING*

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West Indian literature resonates with the presence of influential female characters, who in many cases are vital to the movement and climax of a narrative, even if they are not main characters. As Caribbean female writers continue to emerge and gain prominence in Caribbean fiction they tackle issues such as class, gender and sexuality with resounding success. Writers like Jamaica Kincaid Simone Shwarz-Bart and Patricia Powell, to name just a few, draw critical attention to women and their personal lives in various social, psychological and sexual contexts.

One recent voice in the chorus of female writers that focus on the presence and meaning of the Caribbean woman is Oonya Kempadoo. Kempadoo's novel, *Tide Running*, weaves a complicated path between sexuality, the ethnic other and self-imposed imperialism in what is a sometimes sexually graphic novel where power and desire collide in a quiet Caribbean island buffeted by the tides of global consumerism. Born in Britain and raised in Guyana, Kempadoo is a Guyanese native who was and her first novel, *Buxton Spice* also focused on, among other things, the sexual development of young girls growing up in Guyana. *Tide Running*, set entirely in Tobago, the small sister island to Trinidad, serves up a very different kind of sexuality that focuses on three adults locked in a complicated relationship that sees race, gender and sexuality helping to define each character.

The protagonist and alternating narrative voices in the text are Bella and Cliff. Bella is a Trinidadian woman of unclear racial status, perhaps East Indian mixed with black or white mixed with black, who is married to a white British man named Peter. Cliff is a dark skinned Afro-Tobagonian who is in love with the beauty of his island's ocean--a metaphor for chaos and danger, despite its evocative beauty. Indeed, the three major characters seem to derive their essences from the sea as a chaotic force from which spring life beauty and connections to other worlds. Peter is the steadfast corporate lawyer, whose name in Christian theology means "rock", and who like his Biblical namesake, goes forth to become a fisher of men when he actively encourages Cliff to have an affair with his wife. Bella, like her name is a beautiful woman who trains her gaze through a photographic lens to capture the natural beauty that she experiences in a romanticized fetishism of Tobago. Cliff is poor and un-employed, revealing his name as indicative of a personality that teeters on the brink of Caribbean social life.

The complicated alliances that begin among the three characters takes on multiple levels of meaning when both Cliff and Peter make Bella the object of their sexual affections, a process in which lies the promise of redemption from a colonial past (Peter) and the embodiment of American-style material success (Cliff). Eventually, Cliff compromises his moral integrity when he begins to steal from Bella and Peter. The real theft however, is the loss of the simple soul of the Caribbean as it is pulled from one imperial paradigm to another, between Europe and America, while it tries to make something culturally compelling and sustainable out of the beauty of its people and surroundings. Thus, the double narrator motif leads readers to understand the competing voices of the Caribbean that seek to be heard, understood and accepted as legitimate articulations of the issues facing the region.

An understanding of the characters inevitably leads the reader back to the author, the details of whose life comports with some facets of the novel. Kempadoo herself is often described physically in uncertain racial terms; she is British-born, married to a white British man, but is now a Caribbean resident; she also was, before becoming a writer, involved in the visual arts. As such Kempadoo herself, much like her characters, is a reflection of the topos of the Caribbean as a Creole space that constantly struggles with issues of limited class mobility, poverty, sexual liberation and the barrage of Euro-American culture that constantly assaults and co-opts the West Indian psyche. Like

Bella the Caribbean seems to exist in a glass house where "you can see all through" (51) to observe and capture the essence of what goes on inside the region. Thus it seems, that Bella is not the only photographer in the text after all, the novel invites the reader to see the Caribbean in a certain kind of way as we share the gaze of each character in the text.

Tide Running succeeds as a critical text and a popular one; a fine balance for a relatively new novelist to make. Amidst a control of the variations in West Indian English, some quite hilarious scenes, and many juicy sensual descriptions, Kempadoo offers a complex analysis of sexuality in the Caribbean. In a region where the stereotype is sometimes one of a hyper-sexualized culture that erupts from repressive social and economic structures, the text allows its readers to be both insiders and outsiders to beautiful and erotic lives in a beautiful and exotic space.

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