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**Respectability and Reputation: A Balancing Act**

Lisa Boucher

Caribbean society is fraught with divisions and though divisions exist within all societies, those in the Caribbean are particularly pronounced. Competition exists between gender, race and social classes. Each of these groups have particular value systems to relate to their position in life. In his book, _Crab Antics_, Peter Wilson asserts that there are two opposing value systems: respectability and reputation. He believes that respectability was brought in by the colonizers and that reputation is the true Caribbean value system. He also believes that success and true independence for Caribbean countries are not possible unless reputation becomes the dominant value system (Wilson 1973:229-230). Wilson also equates respectability with women and reputation with men (Wilson 1973:234). Is this gender distinction valid? I will investigate this question in my paper and, using anthropological research and examples from a Caribbean novel, contradict Wilson’s findings. I will attempt to show that men and women participate in both respectability and reputation.

A clearer definition of what Wilson means by respectability and reputation is required before I begin my argument. Wilson believes that respectability is the value system of the colonizers. It emphasizes marriage, the home, self-restraint, work, education and also reinforces social hierarchy (Burton 1997:158). The main institutions of respectability are the church and the school (Besson 1993:16). According to Wilson, “...women are the strongest forces for respectability” (Wilson 1973: 234).

Reputation is the counter-system of respectability. It is based on equality and personal worth as opposed to respectability, which maintains social hierarchy. Its main institutions can be seen as the rum-shops and the streets where “crews” of men meet. A man’s reputation is determined by his sexual adventures, fatherhood, skills and experience (Besson 1993:16). Expressive skills such as music, boasting, story-telling and verbal contests such as argument and exchanging insults are especially prized (Wilson 1973:154-157). Experience is also immensely valued: “...for a man to be able to give an account of his experience in different parts of the world...is to be able to establish a claim to being learned and hence respected” (Wilson 1973:158). Wilson claims that women have no part in competing for reputation and that it is a way in which men secure their identities away from the world of respectability (Wilson 1973:149).

Wilson is partly correct when he says that women try to maintain respectability in their lives. Most women will attempt this because of their roles in society. In Barrow’s study of Jamaican lower-class expectations of men and women in the family, she found that women have the most responsibility. Men are only expected to provide some economic support and to discipline children, mainly their sons. These duties do not require that men be home regularly. According to Barrow, “Men boast about having children, not about their contributions in rearing them” (Barrow 1996:172). All domestic work and childcare is left to the women. Women also accept that they will be required to bring in an income for a great portion of their lives (Barrow 1996:172). Wilson says, “If a woman is ambitious to improve her social standing through her children, she must encourage the economic careers of her sons – and enhance the respectability of her daughters” (Wilson 1973:103). However, although I am sure that some women try to gain status through their children, their intentions are usually more selfless than this. Most women simply want their children to be successful. They encourage the values of respectability, especially education and hard work, so their children will not have to struggle to survive. I believe that Caribbean women are more likely to engage in the value system of respectability because of their responsibilities as mothers.

Men are a part of the value system of respectability too. Examples of this are present in the Caribbean novel _Brown Girl, Brownstone_ by Paule Marshall. This novel shows the struggle between the worlds of respectability and reputation by tracing the life of Selina, a Barbadian girl who grows up in Brooklyn. The majority of men in this novel operate in both value systems. The best example of this is one of the leaders of the Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen. This man is known for his skills at public speaking and one woman declares, “The man is an orator” (Marshall 1959:183). He does not operate in the world of hierarchy and wants all Barbadians to have an equal chance to succeed in Brooklyn. However, this man clearly puts forth the values of
respectability, as do all members of the Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen. This association values hard work and education and many members believe that they cannot survive in America without owning a house. Men and Women are equally attracted to the organization. Members join because they want to give their children a chance to do well in America and to prove to white Americans that Barbadians are capable of anything. Although Wilson claims that men operate mostly in the value system of reputation, it is clear that once men have responsibilities and have to provide for others, they adopt many of the values of respectability too.

Women also participate in both value systems and many examples demonstrate their competition for reputation. Two ways that they do this is through land-ownership and in their occupations. Wilson believes land, especially family land, to be the foundation for the system of reputation. Family land is a system that does not heed the eurocentric considerations of gender, birth order or legitimacy. Any descendant of the original owner can make a claim on this land (Besson 1993:22). Wilson speaks of these claims on family land as giving men a sense of belonging. However, despite the ideal of egalitarian claims on land, some people acquire more land than others. Wilson says, “People quarrel and spend a lot of time and effort manoeuvring for an advantageous position for themselves, especially in respect to land” (Wilson 1973:57). He believes that this competition is between equals and that it is the system of respectability which interrupts this and divides land by status and wealth (Wilson 1973:56-58). Besson argues, however, that women, who Wilson believes function only by the system of respectability, play a prominent role in controlling or creating family land also. She says that in the Jamaican peasant village of Martha Brae many women are the trustees of old family estates and she tells us that the trustee of the largest landholding family line is a woman. She also says that women are also responsible for creating many of the new family estates. This shows that women also engage in the egalitarian politics of land, which Wilson labels “crab antics” (Besson 1993:22). Women clearly compete for reputation through land just as men do.

Women also compete for reputation in business. Market-women, called Higglers, are the most obvious example of this. Although Wilson acknowledges the role of market-women, he claims that women are more successful at “small-scale trading” because “they do not have to comply with the obligations of reputation” (Wilson 1973:161). However, he does not recognize that these women have to possess expressive skills to be successful businesswomen. They must develop haggling skills to be able to make the best profit and they must also be able to build connections with other market-women. For example, Besson tells us of a woman who used to have another Higgler buy clothes for her from Kingston for her to sell. Once this woman established a reputation, however, she would make these trips herself (Besson 1993:25). Besson gives other examples of women entrepreneurs in Martha Brae. She says that some women sell cooked food to visiting tourists, own grocery stores and that one even owns a rum-shop. She says that all of these businesses “compete for custom with each other and with similar establishments kept by village men” (Besson 1993:25). Besson provides many examples of how women compete for reputation either through land-ownership or business.

Examples of this are also present in the Caribbean novel Brown Girl, Brownstone. Selina’s mother, Silla, seems at first to be the embodiment of all the values of respectability. Throughout the novel her goal is to own a house and she makes many sacrifices for this. She works hard, first as a domestic servant and later in a factory. She also pushes her daughters to get an education and cannot understand when Selina does not want to further her schooling (Marshall 1959). However, although she seems to operate only in the world of respectability, Silla clearly competes for reputation also. Silla is well respected for her power of speech by the other women. This is clear in a kitchen scene when Silla is arguing with some of her women friends. Selina is just a little girl but she senses her mother’s reputation among the others. Marshall writes that to Selina her mother’s words “were living things to her. She sensed them bestriding the air and charging the room with strong colours. She wondered at the mother’s power with words...” (Marshall 1959:61). Later in her life, Selina inherits these expressive skills and uses them to her advantage. She manages to convince the Young Associates of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen to accept her into their group even though she had insulted them previously. Once in this association she volunteers actively and at meetings “there was a stir of interest when she raised her hand and an attentive silence as she
spoke” (Marshall 1959:224). Selina achieves the reputation of a leader and this reputation gains her a scholarship. Silla and Selina are both females who compete for reputations to be accepted by their people and to improve their lives.

In this paper I have argued that Wilson was wrong to equate respectability with women and reputation with men. There is no such clear-cut division. I have attempted to prove this with some anthropological sources and examples from Caribbean literature. I have shown that women are more likely to operate in the system of respectability because of their family responsibilities. However, once men “settle down” and have to provide for others they often become a part of this system too. I have shown that women also compete for reputation. I have used the examples of landowners and businesswomen to prove this. Examples have also been provided from Brown Girl, Brownstones of women who gain reputation by the use of expressive skills and are accepted and rewarded by their people for this. In my research, it has become clear to me that most Caribbean people attempt to balance the values of respectability and reputation. Wilson claims that for there to be success in the Caribbean, the system of respectability must be transformed or eliminated (Wilson 1973:233). However, I believe that only by balancing these two systems will a person triumph within their community and the world at large.

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