



DEHUMANIZATION OF CUBAN BODIES DURING THE SPECIAL PERIOD IN  
GUTIÉRREZ'S *DIRTY HAVANA TRILOGY*

RAJEEV SINGH MAYANGLAMBAM

Research Scholar

Centre of Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Latin American Studies

School of Language, Literature and Cultural Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Email: [rajeevmaya91@gmail.com](mailto:rajeevmaya91@gmail.com)



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ABSTRACT

The Special Period was a time when the Cubans had to deal with the reality of extreme economic hardship. In fact, this period was arguably the worst economic crisis in Cuban modern history, which dehumanized and displaced many Cubans. Cuba, once considered a harbinger of socialist experimentation, had to surrender to the waves of neo-liberal economic measures tailored by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. With the subsequent liberalization of the economy and the entry of Foreign Direct Investment, Cubans were made vulnerable to become a mere body, only to be penetrated for exploitation. Moreover, with the failure of the Castro government policy measures to address the economic crisis, it compounded the economic hardship leading to various undesirable consequences. Such as an extreme level of dehumanization of Cubans, especially the ones living at the margin. The island and its people were practically turned into objects or commodities, susceptible to exploitation, only to serve the economic interest of the non-Cubans. The adverse effects of neo – liberal economic policies and globalization have been experienced by many countries worldwide. Cuba, during the Special Period, like any of the third world countries was left completely overwhelmed with the grossness of the violence related to neo – liberal economic policies and globalization at large. In fact, many aspects of the island's political, social, economic life and its literary production too remains altered. The novel, *Dirty Havana Trilogy* by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, manifests as an account of the experienced disillusionment among the Cubans, who live their daily lives under circumstances of economic crisis and threat of political collapse, and also portrays how such state of affairs had turned the Cubans into mere cynical and animalistic creatures. This paper analyses the context wherein Cubans were commodified and objectified, and also made many of the Cubans, a subject of violence and dehumanization.

**Keywords:** Special Period, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Cuban Revolution, Dirty Realism, Dehumanization, Objectification

The glorious Latin American Boom literature was invariably, deeply associated and motivated by the Cuban Revolution. Gabriel García Márquez himself had affirmed this notion by stating that, "Every Latin American writer of that generation had been writing for twenty years, but the European and the American publishers had very little interest in them. When the Cuban revolution started there was suddenly a great interest in Cuba and Latin America" (Márquez). Likewise, the Special Period marked by social and political upheavals too had translated into a new form of writing from the Island, per se, the Dirty realism (*Realismo sucio*)<sup>1</sup>. It mirrors the other side of the reality of a post-soviet Cuba: a reality that captures the hardships faced especially by the marginalized Cubans in combating the economic crisis. Per se, a new identity of the island, wherein ordinary Cubans are unwittingly enmeshed in extremities of acts to come to terms with the economic hardships. In short, Dirty Realism exposés the harsh reality, which otherwise remained hideous under the official rhetoric maintained by the revolutionary government. In this regard, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez may be undoubtedly credited as one of the earliest Cuban pioneers of Dirty Realism.

This paper aims to examine the context wherein Cubans living in this period were forced to degradation and dehumanization as narrated in the novel *Dirty Havana Trilogy*. This article will analyse how economic well being of a society interrelates with human disposition. As to how, the economic collapse translated to dehumanization, which in turn breeds cynicism and animalistic behavior among the Cubans. Further, societal cleavages are very complex in nature- such as how gender, caste, race, violence and morality, operates in Cuban society and within its body politic as forces that impeded the progressive steps of the revolution, especially during the Special Period. This elevates the exotification of the island and commodification of Cuban bodies to unprecedented extremes. The Cuban identity, particularly that of the Afro-Cubans became victims of objectification, violence, and sexual commodification. Further, this paper discusses the complexities of class differences, racial discrimination, violence, dehumanization, commodification of bodies.

The *Dirty Havana Trilogy* (originally published as *Trilogía sucia de La Habana* in Spanish) is one of the five novels by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez that make up the series called *Centro Havana Cycle* (*El ciclo de Centro Habana*) published between 1998-2003. These novels are essentially set entirely in the dilapidated downtown district of central Havana. The novel revolves around the day to day life of the protagonist, Pedro Juan who is presumably the alter ego of the author experiences filth, sensuality, crime, violence and poverty. Once a supporter of the revolution, the disillusioned Pedro Juan now wanders in the barrios of Havana. He lives a promiscuous life, drinks lots of rum, smokes marijuana. In his struggle for survival, he takes up all kinds of menial jobs ranging from being a peddler, pimp, plumber, trash collector and many more. Throughout the novel, he is seen searching for food and in the course noticing his neighbours, either having sex or fighting. Sometimes, he finds either food or a sexual companion or some cheap rum or marijuana to smoke. Though, only once in a while, his most fortunate times indeed, are when he manages to find (food, sex, rum, and weed) all at the same time. To access or to be treated with all of the above simultaneously apparently is his most luxurious dream. For the most part, however, the search for gratification of various forms, some necessities and others purely to do with pleasure, results in encounters with other characters who live in the barrio, mostly dirty, hungry and compelled to resort to means to take advantage and exploit one another. The anti-hero, Pedro Juan is the representation of the disillusioned Cuban man; macho, alcoholic, sexual and his activities often are similar to typical behaviour seen among desperate people. The author confirms this in a conversation with Nazma Muller by stating, "This is the typical response of a desperate person: alcohol, sex, cigarettes. I smoked a lot. This apartment had nothing. No TV, no music, only a box with two blocks, and there I stayed. Nothing, nothing. There was nothing to do. It was very depressing" (Gutiérrez). *Trilogía* explicitly exhibits a complete absence of humility among its characters who do

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<sup>1</sup> *Realismo Sucio* is the Spanish term for Dirty Realism, a literary movement originated in the northern part of America during the mid 20th century. The characters are mainly lowlifes who struggle with problems and challenges posed by the post-modernity in America. The Cuban Dirty Realism advocated by Gutiérrez is a reminiscence of the American dirty realism. But, it would be unjust to merely say that he "only adopts" the American literary style. He develops his own version of Dirty realism which exhibits the aspect of livelihood and its complexity of the Cuabans living in Havana during the Special Period. To read more about American Dirty Realism, see *Dirty Realism in Carver's Work* by Viola Kita.

not fall in line with the principles and morals shaped by the Cuban narrative of the revolution. They live an irrelevant and irreverent life of near invisibility and of no importance whatsoever, very distant from the idea of an ideal man constructed by the ethos of the revolution.

### Hunger and Poverty

Hunger and Poverty are two of the main themes that mark the characteristic of the novel. All the characters of the novel live a very lowly life. In the novel, "hunger" among these people is experienced as an obsession which characterizes their identity and also serves as the basis for forming fleeting relationships with one another. During the 90s, marked by the economic crisis, the rate of poverty, hunger and unemployment was apparently too extreme in Cuba. Literally, Cuba couldn't have gotten worse as the problem was compounded with famine as well. In brief, poverty had taken over everywhere in Cuba. Pedro Juan mentions, "Cuba was just then at the beginning of the worst famine in its history. I think it was 91. Nobody had any idea of all the hunger and the cries still yet to come. I certainly didn't" (Gutiérrez 33).

In the context of the novel, the notion of hunger and the scarcity of food suffered by the Cubans is clearly made evident by the loss of the body weight of the characters. The protagonist himself appears to have lost his weight, and most of the characters he encounters are usually skinny and starved. Hunger and scarcity has destroyed every Cuban soul. The extent humans can act to earn a living is beyond imagination in the face of persistent deprivation as portrayed in a compelling manner. Baldemoro, who comes from the village to Havana becomes Pedro Juan's new neighbour and starts selling Pork liver at cheap price, claiming he gets it for cheap. The neighbourhood starts buying. However, the police soon found out that the meat was human liver which he had been stealing from the morgue. This instance is just an abhorrible gross thing, but, what is more shocking is Pedro Juan's response, "Listen Isabel, it's already been eaten and crapped. Forget about it. Anyway, the way you fixed it, it was delicious, it tasted great" (Gutiérrez 362). Indeed, the economic crisis affected the existence of every Cuban to unprecedented extremes.

### Commodification of Sex

Another recurring aspect of the novel along with hunger, filth, crime, and poverty is the "excessiveness" of sex and its commodification. Despite the fact that Pedro Juan admits of "falling in love", the notion of sex in the *Trilogy* seems to contradict with the conventional concept of love and affection. It appears that the concept of love, affection, and humanity doesn't operate in extreme situations. The protagonist is a libertine. Likewise, other characters or the partners with whom he indulges sexually are also no less lecherous than him. The sexual partners in the novel, including the protagonist, exhibit promiscuous behaviour, and are together with one another solely with the motive of either getting money or food. Sex is no longer interpersonal, and thus is commodified as substitutes for money in catering essentials needed for survival. Sex is rather considered as a commodity to be sold to realize something in return. The sexual activities in the novel are transformed into interchange of virtual money, performing the role of the "dollar." It is the dollar which forced the Cuban women into prostitution. In the chapter, *Essence of Me*, Pedro Juan meets a mulatta in the neighbourhood who was giving him signals. But he realizes that "pesos first and fun later, because if she wanted to go out that night and I was broke, not a penny to treat her, then she'd say, 'oh, what good are you? Go on, I'm not the girl for you'" (Gutiérrez 288). The lady after knowing that he is broke, penniless, changed her attention towards another client. Pedro Juan recounts, "The men passing by were devouring her with their eyes. She was talking to me, but she was looking towards the stand. She was sexy in that bodysuit. Too sexy. A tall, fat, young foreigner, partly white, was buying a soda. She was boring holes in him with her eyes" (Gutiérrez 297). Finally, the lady went with the foreigner who was a Spanish tourist.

Sex emerges as alternative currency, transaction viable in the black-market economy, which enables the Cubans to obtain basic necessities; medicine, housing, and food, otherwise, mainly controlled by the foreign

agency.<sup>2</sup> Like any currency, which transfers from one hand to other, sex in the novel is interchangeable, all the partners are deprived of any stable relationship, they are capricious and susceptible to leave one another for the better option in the offing. Pedro Juan confesses, "What right did I have to demand loyalty? I'm the least faithful of human beings" (Gutiérrez 322).

### The Special Period

The Special Period was roughly experienced between (1991-2005), which was preceded by the fall of the Berlin Wall (1990) and the balkanization of the Soviet Union (1991). Having already passed the first year of the crisis, the novel starts with the protagonist receiving a letter from a friend from London dated June 5, 1993. Therefore, understanding the implicit setting of the novel entails locating Cuba in the wider context of events in international politics as mentioned above. As per the date in the letter, a year had also gone by, since the first time Fidel Castro himself, during a speech at the *Confederación de Trabajadores Cubanos* (Confederation of Cuban Workers) in 1990 announced publicly, that Cuba was putting an end to the policy of relying on USSR's military and economic aid.<sup>3</sup> He predicted that Cuba would sink into an unfamiliar economic crisis, as it would be forced to submit to neoliberal capitalism. Guillermina de Ferrari writes:

Indeed as foreseen by the *Comandante*, Cuba soon lost 75% of its trade partners and 100% of its Soviet funding following the dissolution of CAME (*Consejo de Ayuda Mutua Económica*). In addition, The Torricelli Act of 1992 and, later, the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 further consolidated the American embargo, which had now become an absolute embargo. This situation led Castro to declare that the country would enter a war economy during times of peace. (26)

Some of the measures taken by the then government to combat the burgeoning economic crisis had profound consequences on the lives of Cubans- the rapid and mass opening of the tourism sector, and the introduction of the dollar based market. Cuba, ironically, saw a dramatic rise in the rate of receiving foreign tourists. The legalization of dollar (which until 1993 was penalized) and the mass opening of Cuba's tourism sector had serious economic and social repercussions such as reinforcement of the black market and *jineterismo*, the tourist triggered prostitution.<sup>4</sup> The term *jineterismo* became the new substitution for the definition of prostitution in Cuba, the prostitutes are referred to as *jineteras* or *jineteros*. All in all, it became a very complex issue in Cuba as such trend was not only confined to prostitution., it covered a wide range of "illegal" activities; unofficial tourist guides, taxi drivers, pimping, prostitution, street hustlers of black market etc. In short, many Cubans sold services to the foreign tourists ranging from giving company to providing sex and for many such acts became a modus operandi to livelihood. Many called it "*la lucha*".<sup>5</sup> It was through *Jineterismo* that many Cubans could access what they wanted; goods, dollars, clothes, or the option to leave the island. Thousands of Cubans, both females and males became *Jineteras* or *Jineteros* with the hope of finding a conjugal relationship

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<sup>2</sup> Dual currencies existing in a country was a kind of peculiarity of the Cuban economy until January of 2021. A measure taken up by the Castro government to combat the economic crisis, the Cuban peso (CUP) and the Cuban convertible peso (CUC) were both made legal currencies in the island since 1994. The dollar based market was not easily accessible to everyone, and it didn't flow freely. While most commodities of daily needs were only made available through dollars, the currency of the ration books and the salary of most Cubans were still paid in Cuban pesos. For further reading, please see *A Literature of Exhaustion: Cuban Writing and the Post- Special Period* by Esther Whitfield.

<sup>3</sup> Fidel Castro delivered a Series of speeches at the Workers' Federation Congress. He expressed these worries and the signs of the hard times the Island would have to face after the withdrawal of Soviet support.

<sup>4</sup> *Jineterismo* is the new concept comprising both illegal or semi-legal economic activities generated mainly by the mass opening of tourism in Cuba during the 90s. It's not only confined to prostitution, it covers a wider range of activities including prostitution, pimping and other types of hustlings like selling black market and counterfeit goods, providing taxi service and "unofficial" tourist guides. The word comes from the Spanish word *jinete* which means horse rider. The Spanish verb *jinetea* means to ride a horse in a competition for reward.

<sup>5</sup> The English translation of the phrase *La Lucha* is "the struggle."

as a means to escape from the island that had come under the grip of untold miseries experienced during the Special Period.

First and foremost, *Jineterismo* was an opportunity for a better lifestyle, allowing them to improve their economic condition. In fact, many *jineteras* escaped the island with foreign tourists with good hope of settling abroad. In yet another novel, *Tropical Animal* by Gutiérrez, Pedro Juan manages to get a trip to Sweden through one of his foreign lovers whom he had met in Havana. Nonetheless, as a consequence it also assimilated them to the growing trend of consumerist culture. The nature of relationships the Cubans had with the tourists as displayed in the novel is a type of "transaction" which is always mutual in nature; the foreign clients seek for beauty and exotic Cuban bodies, whereas, the Cubans yearn for a relationship (short term or long term) that benefits and improves their economic condition. In this light, during the Special Period, while Cuba inserts itself to the global economy, in return the Cuban identity gets dehumanized and sexually commodified. Even though prostitution had existed ever, before and since the revolution, *Jineterismo* was clearly a post-revolutionary phenomenon. It was considered to be an outcome of the mass opening of tourism and as it is in nature, opposed the moral overtone forwarded by the revolution.

During the Special period, the topography of the city of Havana seemed to have transfigured into two distinctive landscapes. On one hand, with the heavy rise in the number of foreign tourists, there was a huge increase in the number of local *jineteros*, black marketeers and hustlers, thus the urban streets became more sophisticated and vivid. On the other hand, the barrios or the interiors of Havana city became more rural, dirty, and neglected. With the increasing number of immigrants arriving from peripheries of Cuba, the infrastructure in the barrios was soon rendered inadequate and inappropriate. The novel highlights the plight of the immigrants and the undesirable situation prevalent in the barrios:

There are more of us on the island every day, and by now we don't know what to do with ourselves. The powers that be call it "housing redistribution." The redistributed call it "living with sardines." The powers that be can't even begin to imagine what it's like for six or seven people to live together in a single twelve-by-twelve foot room, with a sliver of a bathroom to match. And if they can imagine it, they play dumb. (Gutiérrez 115)

The novel questions the wellbeing of many Cubans who, with no doubt, had got sheltered through the housing redistribution programme, a programme among many reforms initiated by the Castro government, but for availing such accommodations, Cubans had to compromise many aspects of their "personal" life: hygiene, personal space, security etc. It's like displacing a crowd of unbelievable numbers under the same roof and left neglected forever. The book captures this very landscape of Centro Havana characterized by dirt and dilapidated buildings filled with an unknown number of people, and over populated *solares*.<sup>6</sup> In this respect the dialogue between Dalia and Pedro Juan is revealing, wherein Dalia remarks, "The problem is that the people who live in this building are trash. They've neglected the place and it's falling to pieces" (Gutiérrez 66). To combat the extreme hunger and scarcity of food, people living in the *solares* raise livestock such as pigs and chickens on the common terraces, patios, roofs and in the bathrooms, making the air putrid and the whole neighbourhood unhygienic. The *solares* are permeated with excrement of the animals, not even sparing the highest floors. For instance, Pedro Juan describes his neighborhood, "The smell of the chicken and pig shit started to attract more cockroaches, there had always been cockroaches, but now there were more. And rats: huge animals that came up from the basement of the building, almost eighty feet below. They came up the drain pipes, ran to the cages to eat peeling and scraps, and then plunged down again to their dens" (Gutiérrez 97). The novel revolves in this very landscape which is marked with the ruins of these barrios of Havana. It uncovers the various insecurities and threats the Special Period had posed on the Cubans.

### The challenge for the Revolution

<sup>6</sup> *Solares* are heavily crowded and partially deteriorated houses. For further description, see Aesthetics Under Siege: Dirty Realism and Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's "Trilogía Sucia de la Habana", especially page 41.

The pre revolution Cuba under Batista, notoriously known for high level corruption served as the adventure land for the US run mafias, filled with casinos and hotels run by gangsters that also facilitate prostitution on a large scale. Cuba in fact was considered the “brothel” for the Americans and Europeans before the revolution. Since the time of the discovery of the *Nuevo Mundo* (New World) by the infamous Christopher Columbus and other subsequent expeditions led by the early Spanish colonizers, the entire Latin America had always been exotified, and considered as a recreation ground for the white Americans and the Europeans. Given this, the revolution which implemented a series of social reformation programmes on social equity, education, health, and land reforms had once saved Cuba from such a predicament. Infact, the revolutionary government along with FMC (*Federación de Mujeres Cubanas*) tried to curb down prostitution and initiated many rehabilitation programmes for prostitutes which were initially successful.<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, the Castro government didn't encourage tourism as it comes with links that promote gambling, casinos, prostitution all geared to entertain the foreigners. Thereby, tourism was almost shut down, permitting only a few friendly socialist nations.

However, the revolutionary reformative schemes didn't last more than 2-3 decades and by the early 1990s, in circumstances of deplorable economic conditions, Cuba had to give in to neoliberal dictates. In the post revolution Cuba of the 90s, the island too was forced to lose its privilege and become a mere exotic body/space disposed to be penetrated into. No wonder that Esther Whitfield points out “Castro government projected Cuba itself as available for consumption, and its physical and human resources as bodies to penetration” (Whitfield). It is revealing that even the Castro government itself labelled tourism a “necessary evil.” In this light, legalization of dollar and mass opening of tourism were considered as necessary steps to incorporate Cuba into the global economy, and more also as a practical way to face the Special Period at large. The steps taken had reinforced some of the unwanted pre revolutionary characteristics with respect to various social dimensions such as race, class, and gender to the Cuban society which the revolution had fought against. One of the most idealistic products of the revolution was the creation of “*Hombre Nuevo*” or the new man. The new man which was conceptualized by Che Guevara and Fidel Castro should be charitable, dedicated, and generous. However, the economic crisis damaged every Cuban's soul, many had to compromise their dignity and honour. People had become selfish, cynical, and non-cooperative. The unanimity of Cuban society delivered by revolution was once again in stake.

### **Racial Discrimination and Objectification**

Cuba has a very complex social system comprising various races; the white skinned, the black Afro-Cubans, and the mulatto race. During the Special Period, there was a steep rise of instances of racial discrimination and economic inequality, wherein Afro-Cubans and mulattos were at the receiving end. The novel exhibits the prevalence of highly racist and sexist views toward them. Pedro Juan himself validates, “I am white, more or less, and back then my white man's sense of duty made me lose sight of the most important things in life. My brain had been too well-inoculated with self-discipline, injected with a sense of responsibility mixed with authoritarianism and patriarchal structure (Gutiérrez 17). Being a “nonblack”, Pedro Juan enjoys the advantage of his skin colour, and positions himself on the top of the racial hierarchy. He often makes racially derogatory statements about the blacks. In one such instance, he comments, “The bathroom was disgusting, it looked as if it had never been cleaned. But what can you do? That's the way it is with blacks” (Gutiérrez 16). Most of his sexual encounters are either with black ladies or mulattas. Black bodies, still are the victims of racial and sexual exploitation. In fact, such stereotypes with respect to Black and Mulattos have resurfaced in a post-revolution Cuban society, though the revolution had fought against inequality and had promised for a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

As mentioned earlier the disparity among the Cubans is not only manifested by economic ground, the place of birth, but more pertinently by the colour of the skin. The Afro-Cuban identity was highly racialized. The

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<sup>7</sup> For additional information about the prostituon in Cuba before and after the Cuban Revolution, see “*The Cuban Revolution and the Struggle against Prostitution*” by Rosa del Olmo.

concept of “pure” and “impure” race was attributed to the difference between the white and the black skin. In such a case, whites were considered pure, authentic, whereas the blacks were looked down as impure, unclean. In many Latin American countries, the notion of whitening or *blanqueamiento* – the process of refinement was a very common phenomenon which intended to denounce any indication of the unique characteristic of blackness/Africanness in various spheres of culture; religion, music, dance etc.<sup>8</sup> Thereby, it is pertinent to account the contemporary understanding of the skin colour and its attributes in the Cuban society. The blacks are projected as “different” and “inferior” from the other races in the Cuban society.

They are characterized either for their uninhibited sexuality or barbarism. For instance, the black female characters in the novel are either criticized for their “exotic” bodies for having big buttocks, while the black males for their barbarity, hyper masculinity, and vulgarity. For example, the case of Sarah Baartman and other similar instances across the 18th century, indicates how the black female bodies were objectified.<sup>9</sup> The stereotypical representation of blacks as “inferior race” or “slaves” in the likes of an early Cuban novel, *Sab* by Gertrudis Gomez de Avellande, published in 1841 still persists in the Cuban society, even after a gap of a century or so. In *Trilogy*, Pedro Juan seemingly has a patronizing tone for the blacks and in many instances he makes derogatory comments about the blacks. He describes the black radio jockey in such terms, “He seemed smart, and I’m always happy to come across smart, proud black guys, instead of the kind who won’t look you in the eyes and who have that pathetic clinging slave mentality” (Gutiérrez 7). Pedro Juan, by all means, is a product of the highly stereotypical and prejudiced social norms that governed the Cuban society then. Otherwise, Pedro Juan is a victim of the highly racialized social and political structure of the society. Thereby, he is a victim as well as the perpetrator that contributes in sustaining the anomalies in Cuban body politic.

The revolutionary Cuba endorsed its mixed-mestizo cultural inheritance and believed that racial bigotry was unpatriotic. As a matter of fact, Castro himself reckoned Cubans to be a mixture of Afro-Latin people and also acknowledged the great number of the participation of blacks in Cuban Revolution. The revolution had denounced racism and class disparity. *Trilogy* seems to be suggesting the contrary, the post revolutionary Cuba’s official stand towards racism still remains indecisive. Even if, the “blackness” is considered to be an important aspect that makes up the Cuban identity, still, racial discrimination towards the blacks is still evidently persistent. In view of the prevalence of widespread trend of practice of racial prejudice across the world wherein, the whites (Americans and Europeans) are assumed as higher, superior, than the Asians and Africans. The Cuban society, too, was also not different in this respect. Paradoxically, rumba, a musical style which is considered as an integral feature of the Cuban identity, has its origin in Afro-Cuban culture.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the black Cubans are still considered to be culturally inferior to their white counterparts. More pertinently, contemporary Cuba still

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<sup>8</sup> Oxford reference states *Blanqueamiento* as the concept of ethnic, cultural, and racial “whitening.” It’s a social practice of mixing with the white skinned race with an aspiration and a possibility of transforming one’s social status by becoming a white person. For further details, see “*Colorism and the Law in Latin America - Global Perspective of Colorism Conference Remarks*” by Tanya Katéri Hernández.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Baartman was an “ordinary” African woman of the 19th century of the Khoi Khoi race. She was renamed by the European colonizers as Hottentot Venus. She was a victim of objectification and her physical existence was reduced to a mere object of entertainment and recreation for the colonizers. Due to her large buttocks which weren’t equal or normal according to the European colonizers’ narrative she became a subject of exhibition. To know more about Sarah Baartman, see the documentary “*The Life and Times of Sarah Baartman*” 1998, directed by Zola Maseko.

<sup>10</sup> Rumba is a genre of rhythmic dance which is widely associated with African Culture. Historically, in the context of Cuba, it was developed mainly in the marginalized and the shanty neighbourhoods of cities like Havana and Matanza, and grew its popularity in the rural spaces populated by the African slaves. Earlier, it was considered as *una cosa de negros* (a black thing) associating with the low life. The socialist government of Fidel had elevated the status of Rumba recognizing and valorizing the African contribution to the identity and the culture of Cuba. For more details, refer to “*National Symbol or a ‘Black Thing’?: Rumba and Racial Politics in Cuba in the Era of Cultural Tourism*” by Rebecca M. Bodenheimer.

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exhibits racism, its manifestation remains very much evident in various dimensions of personal, social, and cultural relationships.

### The Dehumanized Black Bodies

As mentioned above, with respect to objectification, commodification, and dehumanization of black bodies, the system of slavery during the colonial era in Latin America had established a rigid and negative conceptualization of black bodies. Such conceptualization of the black bodies inhumanely and unsustainably rationalizes the structural violence making black bodies victims of exploitation, and sexual objectification, per se commodification of Afro-Cubans. The book, *Autobiography of a Slave*, written by the first Afro Cuban slave poet, Juan Francisco Manzano in the 19th century had exposed how the black identity and the human will of Manzano was impeccably destroyed by his white lady owners for their pleasure. He is rewarded with fine clothes, taught to read and write by his mistress whenever she is pleased with him. Otherwise, given ragged clothes and punished whenever he came short in pleasing them. As a result, his identity is stripped off all dignity, reduced to an object at the mercy of the will and mood of his mistress. In short. Manzano's destiny and fortune lies in the hands of his mistresses.

Commodification of bodies is much worse in the case of the female black bodies. Afro Cuban women had to suffer a double layered form of discrimination; first for being a female, secondly for their colour. Herein, it is apt to recall Franz Fanon, who had theorized the imagination of the whites over the black bodies to be super sexual. In this respect, Gutierrez's novel also confirms this idea. The body of black women and mulatta is the receiver of casteist and sexist remarks, and it is reduced into mere erotic and provocative objects. In fact, Afro Cuban bodies, especially that of females were highly exoticized by the tourists, and tourism with its unwanted tentacles reinforces the societal cleavages amounting to mass exotification of black bodies. Such trends, impinged on the Cuban identity, Cubans were reduced to be objects that can be readily packaged and made available for the exploitation by the white Americans and European tourists. In view of the issue of the increasing commodification of black bodies, the novel stretches this phenomenon of exotification by way of portraying Afro Cuban characters as mere sexual commodities. The novel confirms this notion of exotification, Luisa, a *jinetera* who lives with Pedro Juan narrates her experience of meeting a tourist:

She told me about the guy she had picked up the night before in Malécon. She likes to give me the details, every little detail. Last night's guy wanted to have sex on the beach, on the island. And that's what he got. Full Moon, palm trees, and gorgeous mulatta. It doesn't get any more tropical than that. The guy, a typical European, had his own condom in his pocket. Everything was straight forward. (Gutiérrez 172)

This exposes the very nature of the demands or the desires of the European tourists who come to Cuba. Each tourist seemingly comes with a set of fantasies built upon the concept of what exotic and tropical means to them; whereas, the Cubans were ready to sell their bodies and make a reality of the wildest of the dreams the tourists may harbour. The violence and the degradation upon the female identity as it is depicted in the novel only confirms that, it downgrades the feminist struggle for equality. Moreover, commodification of black bodies undermines the progressive struggles made in the name of the Cuban revolution itself.

Similarly, Afro-Cubans male identity also suffers objectification and sexual commodification though of a different nature. As such, black male bodies symbolize "the bearer of violence" and are also misrepresented as hyper-sexual. This stereotypical characterization of black male as hyper virile and violent can be traced back to the system of slavery, wherein black men were associated with qualities ranging from being muscular, strong, savage, and wild. Appearance of them itself signifies a threat that connotes unrealistic characterization which are at best defamatory and derogatory. They are presented as violently threatening creatures with prejudiced stereotypical characteristics of being hyper masculine and extremely violent. The black characters in Gutiérrez's works are depicted in binaries that reinforce the irrational notion of white people as civilised, tender, and gentlemanly, whereas blacks as savage, wild and violent. Such descriptions resemble with that of the typical narratives prevalent in the time of slavery, which mainly emphasized the structure of physical anatomy and its connotation. Likewise, Pedro Juan's remark confirms this stereotypical objectification of blacks, "The bartender was a big black guy with the face of a killer" (Gutiérrez 152).

The sexual identity of the black male bodies are simply discriminated against on the basis of sexual organs and illustrated as violent creatures. Afro-Cuban male characters in Gutiérrez's works are once again victims and perpetrators of violence. In *El Rey de la Habana (The King of Havana)*, another novel which forms a part of the "*Ciclo de Habana*", the protagonist Reynaldo relies on his sexualized body for survival, nearly becoming a *pinguero*.<sup>11</sup> Starting from his very first sexual encounter with a 52 year old woman, he assumes the role of a *pinguero* and had to misuse his sexually objectified body (of having a big phallus) to avail much needed economic benefits in return. Herein, Rey is objectified, just a mere body in the system of transaction; for the lady to attain her sexual desires and him, for meeting material needs. Lisenby writes, "The sexual tourism industry in Cuba disproportionately employs/exploits Afro-Cuban men and women as *pingueros* and *jineteras*, respectively, marketing their bodies as tropicalist fantasy to foreign clients" (332).

What Gutierrez in his novels confirms, the stereotyped black bodies that perpetuate the victimization of Afro-Cubans, became apparently even more blatant during the Special Period, as they were exploited, dehumanized and victimized to unprecedented extremes. In the novel, many freak entertainment shows were organized to attract the tourists, wherein the Cuban bodies are transacted as mere sexual commodities. As such, there are a countless number of incidents in the novel whereby the hyper-masculinized Cuban bodies are objectified and sexually commodified. One such typical victim is the character, Superman, in the *Trilogy*, who confides to Pedro Juan how once he had to earn his living by often exposing his sexual organ in a theatre, 30 centimeters long for the audience. On one occasion, he was made to watch a white couple having sex made visible only to him, he would then ejaculate in front of the audience without touching his organ for which he was rewarded applauds and shouts of appreciation from the audience. *Trilogy*, criticizes the sexual commodification of Cubans largely fueled by the nature of tourism; more precisely, its undesirable effects which dehumanized many Cubans, and thus also affected their social behaviour, changed their perceptions towards love and affection. The confession of Superman further confirms that Afro-Cuban males during the Special Period had to encounter dehumanizing experience which in turn caused, alienation, commodification, and objectification of black bodies:

Lots of nights, I couldn't come at all. By then I was half crazy because I had spent so many years straining my brain. I took Spanish fly, ginseng; in the Chinese pharmacy on Zanja, they made me drink a tonic that helped but it made me jittery (...) I had a wife. We were together for our whole lives, more or less, from the time I came to Havana until she died a few months ago. Well, during all of that time, I was not able to come with her. We never had children. My wife didn't see my jism in twelve years. She was a saint. She knew that if we fucked as God willed and I came, then at night I wouldn't be able to do my number at Shanghai. I had to save my jism for twenty four hour to do the Superman show. (Gutiérrez 59-60)

## CONCLUSION

Paradoxically, the Special Period of Cuba provoked a "new boom" in various spheres of cultural production which include literature also. Nonetheless, such new phenomena of the "new boom" were dollar driven in nature. The decriminalization of the dollar, though deemed as a necessary step to revive the economy, resulted in the devaluation of the existing Cuban peso. The effects of dollarization further exacerbated the existing economic disparity among the Cubans- those who had dollars, and those with no dollar. *Dirty Havana Trilogy* as a whole, succinctly brings out the undesirable impact of the scarcity of dollars on Cuban society. The "Dirty Realism" as a literary form was mainly propelled by the Special Period that captures the effect experienced by the Cubans- poverty, material and spiritual deprivation, marginality, disillusionment. Moreover, it also hints the impotency of the Cubans in facing the new global market forces. As Cuban tourism, geared to meet the needs of the foreign tourist, likewise, the literary production, or the dirty realist text were mainly written for the consumption of foreign readers. Esther Whitfield affirms, "To make this claim means naming *Trilogía's* principal readers as

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<sup>11</sup> In Cuba, the term *Pinguero* signifies male sex worker who provide sexual service to tourists, both male and female clients. For further details, refer to the article, Dark Ambivalence: Resurgent Stereotypes of Afro Cuban Masculinity by David Lisenby.

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primarily foreign to Cuba, living in Europe, Latin America or the United States and buying their books, directly or indirectly, from large-scale commercial publishers" (Whitfield). In both the process, promotion of Cuban tourism and cultural/literary production, the Cuban identity gets denigrated as it is reduced to mere objects. *Trilogy* sells the abjection of the Cubans by portraying a new Cuban identity characterized by dirt, filth, sexual and racial prejudice, all together packaged for the consumption of the foreign readers. This new identity of Cubans conceived in context of the Special Period wherein all the social vices- marginalization, poverty, violence, alcoholism, prostitution, sexism became extreme in Cuban society. Such extremities hindered the agenda of building a prosperous Cuba as propagated by the Revolution. In sum, Dirty Realism of Gutiérrez with its new narratives is a critique of the Cuban social system and it exposes the mass dehumanization of Cubans during the Special Period which was otherwise concealed by the glory of the revolution.

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