Fractured Consciousness and Colonial Subjugation in George Lamming’s

_In The Castle of My Skin_

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Abstract
Within a defining framework of colonialism, the West Indian writers explicate the cultural obliteration of the Caribbeans by the Western imperialism which results in their psychological fragmentation as they straddle two opposing worldviews. George Lamming’s work delineates the diverse effects of European colonialism on the native Caribbeans whose consciousness is shaped by the history of forced labour and migration. _In the Castle of My Skin_ (1970) explores the colonial subjugation of Barbados, the economic exploitation of people by the landlord, the cultural indoctrination of the natives by the colonizer, the deformed relationships between people and the resultant mental handicap of the perplexed
natives. The present paper shall analyse how European colonialism forces the individuals and community to disassociate from people and values that imparted significance to their existence. It foregrounds the exile of the protagonist, G., from Barbados in order to sever his ties with the social backwardness and crippling poverty of his native place and realise his ambition of personal advancement. More significantly, the paper is an exploration of the colonial experience of the entire community, its inherited values and imposed norms, the interdependence of the personal and the public lives and the most stifling issue of mental colonisation.

Keywords—Big England, Little England, colonisation, cultural distortion, fragmented consciousness.

I. Introduction

European colonialism in the Caribbean resulted in the destruction of native culture and dispersal of people which created a historical discontinuity and problems in self-definition. The discontinuity of history and cultural abrogation resulting from displacement, slave-trade and psychological subjugation severed the relationship of people with tradition and a defining sense of their origins. Again, the immigration of people uprooted from the regions as diverse as Africa and India created a demographically diverse population whose claim to a uniform past was quite problematic. However, the Caribbean writers strive to counteract the Eurocentric view of a homogenous world governed by the benevolent Europeans to write alternative histories of people and their origins. In the Pleasures of Exile (1960), George Lamming stresses that the Caribbean writer moves beyond the confining boundaries of history to explore new possibilities and alternate meanings. He writes: “... the mystery of the colonial is this: while he remains alive, his instinct, always and forever
creative, must choose a way to change the meaning and perspective of this ancient tyranny” (229). Lamming’s work, therefore, explores the new interpretations of colonial history in order to transcend the psychologically disturbing experience of displacement and subjugation. He analyses the psychological damage of the colonized, their inadequacies and anxieties while at the same time seeking new ways to surmount such barriers.

II. Psychological Fragmentation in *In the Castle of My Skin*

George Lamming’s first novel, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1970), is an autobiographical work about the quintessential themes of national belonging and alienation from self and society. The novel explores the colonial subjugation of the people of Barbados to Britain rulers which ultimately results in displacement and a fragmented consciousness of the native Barbadians. The novel is a reconstructive attempt at depicting the totality of the colonial experience in the Caribbean society through the intricate interweaving of the subjective and objective perspectives in the multiple narratives of the novel. The multilayered novel, according to Paul Dorn, is an experience of colonialism at an intimate level. Dorn believes that the colonial subjection results in “societies that continue to frustrate the full development of individual personality ... and limit possibilities for expression and achievement” (n.p.). He sees the disturbed relationships between G., the educated elite, and his rural mother and the discrepancy between the traditional norms and the Western education as the undesired results of colonialism which Lamming himself calls “a daily exercise in self-mutilation” (*In the Castle of My Skin*. xxxix). In his 1983 introduction to the novel, Lamming writes:

> The result was a fractured consciousness,
> a deep split in its sensibility which now
> raised difficult problems of language and
> values; the whole issue of cultural allegiance
between imposed norms of white power,
represented by a small numerical minority,
and the fragmented memory of the African
masses: between white instruction and black
imagination. xxxvii

George Lamming explains that the destruction of a cultural identity in Barbados is an immediate result of English imperialism that goes beyond physical violence to intrude into the personal development of individuals. The first person narrative of the protagonist G. helps the novelist to analyse colonial violence at a close level. The tension between G.’s loyalties towards his mother and towards his friends indicate his straddling between filial obligation and his desire for belonging to his own people. His mother’s aspirations for a better future for his promising son offer him little cultural stability as he is pulled away from his friends whom the mother views as potential threat to his personal success. G. must leave Barbados to begin his journey towards progress and culminate his personal growth in the adult world. While at one level, the novel portrays the coming into consciousness of an individual in the colonial society, at the other level, In the Castle of My Skin is a depiction of the broader events in the English landlord Creighton’s village. The novelist uses the third person narratives in order to depict the “world of whole Caribbean reality” and provide a deep understanding of the complex colonial experience of the native Barbadians. As the existence of the natives is shaped by the British colonialism, there is a strong sense of dilemma caused in the inhabitants of Barbados by being torn between their desires to imitate the civilised British men and a stronger need to belong to their own culture. Moreover, the creation of a hierarchical social order within the Caribbean community itself creates a fracture within the
society where the overseers loyal to the rulers are looked at with suspicion by the common natives who, too, want to seize the opportunities for advancement. In the novel, Lamming has vividly delineated the indoctrination of the young children by the British educational system which generates in them a desire to assimilate within the British consciousness. On the Queen’s birthday, the children are arranged neatly in squads and explained the bond between Big England (Britain) and its foster child, Little England (Barbados):

Good old England and old little England!
They had never parted company since
they met way back ... Three hundred years,
more than memory could hold, Big England
had met Little England and Little England
like a sensible child accepted. 37

The artificiality of the spectacle of the British Empire is evident as the schoolboys look perplexed and seem to be ignorant about the implications of the refined hymning of “God save our gracious King”. The innocent boys, unaware of the history of slavery, are wonderstruck by the great show of the supposedly nurturing and benevolent rulers as they study the King’s face on the pennies. Again, the indoctrination of the impressionistic minds of the children whose ties with the Mother country the imperialistic powers attempt to severe is explicated through the faultless recitation by the children whose visionary universe, according to Jessica I. Damian, “encompass[es] the only two global spheres of consequence ... Barbados and England” (2). Jessica Damian quotes Sandra Pouchet Paquet’s observation in *The Novels of George Lamming* that the educational system in Barbados “… perpetuate[s] ignorance, confusion, and a destructive cultural dependence on
the mother country among its pupils” (qtd. in Damian, 2). She explains that the empty instruction based on the ideals of British obedience makes the knowledge about the children’s specific place within the Empire evade them. The author also evokes the image of the slave history and commodified black bodies through the depiction of the neatly lined squads of schoolboys.

In his theoretical masterpiece, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon makes an astute observation:

> As soon as the native begins ... to cause anxiety to the settler, he is handed over to well-meaning souls who ... point out to him the specificity and wealth of Western values. But every time Western values are mentioned they produce in the native a sort of stiffening or muscular lock-jaw”. 33

The Empire’s endeavour to assimilate the natives within the British national consciousness is fraught with distortion as the hierarchical system witnessed in the school makes any total assimilation impossible. Again, colonialism attempts to eradicate the cultural life of the colonized by the negation of their tradition and their national identity and by systematic enslaving of native minds. Frantz Fanon says that the native culture is a “contested culture” under the imperialistic domination and its obliteration is much sought after by the colonial power. The most effective means to relegate the national culture to the margins is to infuse in the colonized a Western value system that regards the Western tradition as superior and in binary opposition to the non-west. He writes:
Every effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behavior, to recognize the unreality of his ‘nation’, and ‘in the last extreme’, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure. 190

*In the Castle of My Skin* expresses the tragic world of Caribbean experience in which the author projects the intricate system of colonial domination where the black body is objectified, the nations are subjugated, and the cultures eradicated. The psychological predicament of the Barbadians caused due to the cultural dominance is evidenced in the story of Bots, Bambi and Bambina narrated by Boy Blue to his friends. The villager, Bambi, who earlier lived happily with two common-law wives is forced to marry one and the compulsion to choose between the false alternatives makes the formerly compassionate and jovial Bambi take to drinking and ultimately die. Boy Blue explains the psychological fissure created in the villager’s mind due to being coerced into accepting a cultural norm he fails to understand: “Something go off pop in yuy head an’ you ain’t the same man you think you was” (131). Carolyn T. Brown remarks that “Lamming has embodied the opposed modes, the ‘atemporal folk’ and the ‘linear modern’, within the novel’s narrative strategy” (41). Brown sees the villagers’ culture and perspectives as timeless in contrast to the linearity of social change represented by the modern and western values. In the culturally subjugated Caribbean island, the native culture resurfaces and makes a
counterstatement to the repressive rules of the colonialist authority. The perplexed native, Jon, who is unable to comprehend the Western authoritative standards impregnates Brother Bannister’s daughter, Jen, by misinterpreting “free-for-all-Brethren”. Jon is threatened by the European value system into marrying Jen but is pulled away by the other woman, Susie, towards his loyalty to the traditional custom. Elizabeth Nunez-Harell comments on how after their peaceful co-existence with their women is disturbed, Bambi and Jon fail to lead normal lives: “Unable to communicate their feelings, their alienation from a way of life that denies their natural responses of affection and hence of responsibility for more than one woman, both men withdrew from society into a stony silence” (36). The psychological predicament of the colonized is evident as the native norms are no longer tenable within a cultural system that is enclosed and entertains no modifications.

The assertion of an authentic identity untainted by the colonizer’s assumptions is seen in Trumper’s arrival at a consciousness of his Black presence quickened by his stay in America. While Creighton’s village instilled in the natives a sense of depravation and inferiority, it is after leaving the island that Trumper comes to a realisation of what it means to be a “black”, a “Negro” and sees himself as “the blackest evidence of the white man’s denial of conscience” (299). G.’s friend, Trumper, is able to see a clearer picture of things when he identifies himself, a Negro belonging to a non-western country, as doubly marginalized and realises the tenuousness of Barbadian existence within the overwhelming structure of British imperialistic system. He understands that the social classification in Barbados is in actuality a manifestation of racial division. Similarly, G’s exile from his village provides him an opportunity to reflect upon his life and Western perceptions that have intruded upon his sensibility. His exile is the only source that makes knowledge possible. He realises that the episodes from his past will be “put away ... and ...
never heard of again except someone rescues them from the garbage” (258). George Lamming revisits his past and resists the eradication of history by Eurocentric perceptual structures through the journey of the autobiographical character, G., whose life and experiences are representative of the postcolonial writers striving to grapple with the complicities of identity formation and coming to terms with their postcolonial existence.

III. Conclusion

Colonialism in Barbados violates the socio-political and cultural life of people and creates the dilemma and a sense of loss in the individuals whose perceptions are at odds with the colonial system. The subjugation of people and their partial inclusion within the landlord Creighton’s hierarchical system marginalize the common people who are prohibited an entry within the sacred grounds of landlord’s castle. The social order of the village is depicted by the landlord’s Great House lying high on the hills and protected by overseers and separated from the low-lying tenantry by the sacred institutions of church and school. Joyce E. Jonas regards the “landscaped village” as “a microcosm of the novel’s broader landscape in which Big England and Little England co-exist in the parent-child relationship typical of colonialism” (348). The fragile boundaries that G. and his friends attempt to transgress are representative of the “in-betweenness” that the colonized experience as a result of belonging to two opposing cultures. Homi Bhabha explains that colonialism creates “... a desire for a reformed recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (122). The disdainful attitude of the landlord and his overseers towards the natives does not, therefore, completely exclude them from the colonizer’s world as the colonized is persistently asked by the Western system to emulate its models thereby resulting in the psychological dilemma of the colonized.
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