



A POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF GEORGE LAMMING'S IN THE CASTLE OF MY SKIN

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Abstract

This paper examines George Lamming's earliest novel *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) in the light of postcolonial theory. Lamming in this novel explores the colonial experience and its effects on the social, moral and cultural life of his Barbadian natives. This paper employs the key concepts of postcolonial theory such as resistance, decolonisation, oppression, race, identity, third-space and hybridity to analyze the narrative of the novel.

Keywords: Resistance, Racism, Hybridity, Identity, Decolonisation, Oppression.

Introduction

European colonialism has generated feelings of anti-colonialism since the expansion of its empire. All colonized empires have posed many challenges, opposition, violence and resistance towards the domination, subjugation and exploitation done by the powerful alien rulers. These alien subjugators have provoked feelings of resistance and antipathy throughout history. European colonies started meeting resistance from the natives in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Asia, Africa, America and the Middle East. This wave of anti-colonialism and decolonization spread rapidly among all the British colonized empires and entered West Indies during the first half of the twentieth century. Barbados, a West Indian island, which became a European colony during the early seventh century and has been named 'Little England' by European colonizers, its natives started their rebellion against the oppressive foreign rulers. Since the Second World War postcolonialism in literature has been a hot topic of debate in whole academia. For the analysis of contemporary postcolonial literature in English, all the intellectual scholars and critics rely upon the works produced by the writers belonging to the ex-colonies of

Europe; those writers who may or may not be living in the colonized nation at present but are born and matured in the European colonies. Postcolonial literature has emerged in the regions such as the Indian subcontinent, Africa, South America, Nigeria and the West Indies, those regions that have been engaged in the process of decolonization after the Second World War. Traditionally, West Indian writers have contributed enormously to the development of postcolonial English literature focusing on the various racial, cultural, political and lingual issues.

Barbadian-born George Lamming is regarded as one of the earliest West Indian writers to contribute immensely to Caribbean postcolonial literature. He has grown to maturity during the 1930s-40s and witnessed the turmoil created by the colonial rule on his native soil. In his fictional works, he chronicles the historical colonial experiences that his ancestors have related to him along with his personal encounters with the colonizers and the effect of colonization on the lives of colonized natives.

His novel *In the Castle of My Skin* is an enumerated account of violence, decolonization, anti-colonial resistance and racial discrimination. Besides describing the

colonial history through his childhood experiences, the narrator G, also reveals the violence and injustice done to the natives by the colonizers that otherwise in the novel remain eclipsed beneath the apparent accurate order of things. This novel narrates the events of Carrington village of Barbados that since ages is being ruled by the Creighton family however at the time events of the narrative take place Mr. Creighton's descendent is the British representative and the English landlord who is ruling over the land of Barbados. Barbadians have been living a content life under Mr. Creighton and no one has ever expressed his feelings of aggression or protest against the foreign rule even if they might have felt, they never expressed the feelings of disgust. Everyone and everything is neutral and silent until Mr. Slime, a black school teacher left his teaching job for rebelling against the British rule and started a 'Penny Bank' and 'Friendly Society' to make the natives aware of the real intentions of the foreign rulers. He is one among the few who have felt that they have been deprived of their natural rights. He attempts to make the natives realize that they all are being forcibly bereaved of their rights and makes them believe that they can be the masters of their own land, that land which is currently ruled by the foreign rulers. Some villagers believe in him and joined his 'Friendly Society' and also started investing in the 'Penny Bank' introduced by him. Gradually with the progress of narrative, we become familiar with the village 'overseers' who are selected among the black villagers but have been given powers by the English ruler to supervise other villagers of their own race which creates a sense of hostility among the villagers. In the end, the white landlord of the village sells villagers' houses and land to some affluent people of his race and to the new black elites. Poor and depressed villagers dispossessed of their soil are forced to leave the village resulting in the narrative ending on a tear-jerking note.

To have a better understanding of postcolonial literature one must acquaint oneself with the basics of postcolonial theory. Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks* translated in

English in the 1960s are among the earliest postcolonial works dealing with the effects of European colonization on the colonized blacks and the rigorous attempts of the blacks to depose the white colonizers. Fanon himself belonging to the black race expresses his personal experiences that he witnessed during Algeria's freedom struggle against France in the 1950s; later through his works in the 1960s he gave vent to his feelings about black-white relations. *The Wretched of the Earth* deals with colonial violence, decolonization and national culture. Fanon focuses on the "colonized intellectual" someone who has received education under the colonizers and gaining the necessary knowledge turns against him. The "colonized intellectual" plans to uproot the oppressive forces by supporting and advocating his own culture, art and literature i.e "negro art" or "negro literature" that would ultimately lead to the unification of his own race. Fanon discusses three stages in building up of national culture by the colonized intellectual. The first stage is the peaceful one dealing with imitating or mimicking where the colonized intellectual imitates the colonizer's culture, religion, traditions and language and confirms the colonizers tastes by being like him. The second stage deals with the negritude phase or awakening phase in which the native reacts against the acquired foreign culture and traditions, this is the realization stage where the colonized learns that he is being cast inferior by the Europeans and he deprecates the European culture and extols for the superiority of his own. This love for the national culture finally results in the struggle for freedom in the third stage where the colonized intellectual writes "revolutionary literature" with the hope of awakening his own race so that they can counter the colonizer and build a new nation.

Franz Fanon has written in the context of the Algerian colonial occupation by the French. Although these works have been written in connection with Algerian white-black relations still they are applicable to all the colonized nations whose natives suffered at the hands of European colonizers. His significant work *Black Skin, White Masks*

analysis the psychology of blacks who in the White world have been treated and perceived as minor creatures and not as a human being along with this it also studies how the black world is affected by the dominance of whites. In his work Fanon argues that “the black is not a man . . . He is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must be extricated . . . The black man wants to be white. The white man slaves to reach a human level”. (*Black Skin* 10-11)

Fanon’s insight into the psychology of colonialism was simply this: When the colonial paints the native as evil, pagan and primitive, over a period of time the native begins to accept this prejudiced and racialized view as true. As a result, the native comes to see himself as evil, pagan and primitive. The black man loses his sense of self and identity because he can only see himself through the eyes of the white man. Fanon argues that for the native the term *man* itself begins to mean *white man* because he does not see himself as a man at all. (Nayar 217)

The Whites have always established their superiority over the native by portraying themselves as civilized and rational and the Black as primitive and barbarian, the negative one, hence creating the identity of ‘self’ and the ‘other’ where the ‘other’ is considered opposite to ‘self’. In Fanon’s view wearing the ‘white mask’ is only the way for the native to overcome the inadequacies in him “For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white.” (*Black Skin* 12) For this, the native adopt the White’s language, religion, tradition and culture however this mask doesn’t provide a perfect solution to the native. ‘White mask’ over the native’s ‘Black skin’ leads him to duality as a result of which he suffers from a mental disorder. With the sense of inferiority and prevailing inadequacy and knowing the fact that neither he can become truly white nor he can banish the whites from his land, the native turns violent against his own people. This paper deals with the analysis of Lamming’s novel *In the Castle of My Skin* in the light of Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks* as it depicts the three stages of decolonization,

anti-colonial resistance and various instances where the natives try to portray themselves as the white but unable to do so turns violent against people of their own race, this violence according to Fanon is a form of self-assertion and not innate one but the result the violence that the native has experienced himself.

In the Castle of My Skin puts light on various forces and factors that led to the development of the anti-colonial struggle, the revolt of natives against the colonial rule has been portrayed by Lamming in three stages, just like Fanon’s three stages of decolonization. First is the static phase where the natives of Carrington village realize that they have been absolutely absorbed by the white colonizers, second is the returning of natives to their own culture and history and the final stage involves the reawakening of the natives, their decolonization struggle that in this novel ends with disillusionment. The novel’s structure too can be divided into three time periods depicting the three stages of decolonization. First three chapters of the novel depict stability in the villagers’ life, putting light only on the poor living conditions of G., his mother and few other natives of Carrington village. The villagers’ social consciousness is restricted only to their immediate nature and they are completely absorbed in the colonial system. Initially, the narrative of *In the Castle of My Skin* revolves around adolescents’ lives in the Carrington village of Barbados. It commences with G’s ninth birthday that has been persistently spoiled by the rain since he is born. He is flattered by his mother and neighbors that the rain pours blessings upon him on his birthdays but it acts as unproductive consolation for him. His consciousness of god’s injustice to him by not giving a sunlit birthday celebration plunges G. into a sense of deeper loss; loss of his father, grandfather and absence of his grandmother.

“That evening I kept my eye on the crevices of our wasted roof where the color of the shingles had turned to mourning black and waited for the weather to rehearse my wishes. But the evening settled on the slush of roads that dissolved parts into pools of

clay, and I wept for the watery waste of my ninth important day. . . .

My birth began with an almost total absence of family relations, and loneliness from which had subsequently grown the consolation of freedom was the legacy with which my first year opened". (*In the Castle of My Skin* 3-7)

The events in first few chapters in the novel exhibit a frequent sense of loss. The life of the boys; G., Boy Blue, Bob and Trumper in the first stage of the novel focuses on the physical environment and lacks the social and political consciousness. The boys' closeness to nature is revealed by the recurring images of foamy crab filled sea, observing wet footprints on the sea shores, wind swaying trees in the school yard. The social and political stability among the men, women, children and the old in the initial stage of the novel can be viewed in relation to Fanon's first stage of decolonization. In the context of initial phase of novel Ian Munro writes:

Lamming's villagers accept their state of oppression with equanimity and expression of faith in the British Empire and the land lords good intentions - in effect they still accept as the-novel opens, a social order going back to slavery times . . . They get up in the morning to the land lord's bell and go to bed when the lights in the house on the hill go out. (Rao 42)

The next seven chapters of the novel rather than making it adolescents story probe deeper into much vital aspects and gives the narrative a different direction. This stage deals with awakening of the native's consciousness and the broadened vision of Mr. Slime and Shoemaker who in the novel act as colonized intellectuals. Mr. Slime and Shoemaker are the two significant characters in the novel who challenge the colonial system in Carrington; being black they incite their race to confront the accepted order of the things in the village. In the school with growing consciousness and maturity G. and his friends become familiar to their historical past, slavery and about the intentions of Mr. Slime so, this is a realization phase for the adolescents of the village too. As Keenath Ramchand writes:

George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* evokes the boy's world but his intention is to suggest the essential outlines of boyhood in a West Indian Community that is growing painfully — like the four boys in the novel - into political self-awareness and his concern to suggest complex shiftings in the community at large, during a time of dramatic social and political change, takes precedence over any notion of fidelity to the consciousness of G. or the boys as a group. (Ramchand 188)

This phase also demonstrates the education system in Carrington that consciously reinforce the attitude of agreement to the foreign history and heritage among the natives. Rather than teaching the native school boys Barbadian or Caribbean history they are taught history of Britain only. Queen's birthday has been celebrated in the schools as the Empire day, students are made to sing British national anthem among the furling Union Jack flags, this way natives accepted the British heritage and history as their own. The students instead of receiving the colonizers intended message of celebrating the Empire Day are only allured towards the magnificence of the ceremony. "In every corner of the school the tricolor Union Jack flew its message. The colors though three in number had by constant repetition produced something vast and terrible, a kind of pressure or presence of which everyone was a part." (34).

This reflects the efforts of colonizers to instill the feelings of admiration for the colonial Empire among the Caribbean youth. They wish the school going children to forget the unpleasant reminiscences of slavery and British colonialism. This manipulation will work on the psychologies of small children who are yet unacquainted with the torments their ancestors has faced in the hands of cruel whites but most of them upon knowing their history soon will be accustomed with the delusion of English goodwill. Britain has been falsely represented through the texts and speeches, natives have been told that Queen Victoria is praise worthy as she has liberated them from the clutches of slavery. The representation of Barbados as Little England in the school texts has been a part of

British policy to seek native's affection towards them. Through the texts the natives have been made to believe that bond of Little England with Big England's is like the bond of parent and child and it would always be such giving rise to a sense that Barbados along with England is going to rule the world one day. "Little England and Big England, might hand in hand rule this earth. In First World War they went side by side together, and they would do again anytime. Big England had only to say the word and Little England followed" (35). Even the white rulers of Britain have colonized almost whole world for their own economic benefits yet they are fallaciously epitomized by the English inspector on the Empire day and even though the school's head teacher who is black and familiar with the real motives of whites in Barbados and other such colonies, he has no courage to uncover it in front of the school boys and their parents on the Empire Day celebration. "Inspector smiled all the time, while the head teacher grinned jovially as if he and inspector were part of a secret that the others were to guess" (35). The cruel image of colonialism has been concealed from the natives since hundreds of years and there is none among the new generation of village who has experienced slavery himself that's why other than a few old who too have merely heard of it no one believes that slavery ever existed. The teacher's statements and answers to the boys depict the tendency of colonial masters to restrain the natives from knowing their colonial past and the inhumane treatment that their forefathers endured. Even the name 'Little England' that has been given to Barbados suggests that Barbados is close ally to England but this hypocritical and honorable name has been coined to create a false sense of loyalty among the islanders. In the context of myth of Barbados as Little England and false representation of British Empire by the whites Craig Tapping writes, "Lamming in a comparatively straightforward manner writes against history, revising the lies of empire with the truths of communally shared daily lives." (54)

Slavery, slave trade and the past of the native's soil is neither mentioned in the

texts nor it is taught in the schools. Some students of Groddeck's Boys School heard of slavery for the first time on the Empire day celebration when they overheard a few old people talking about queen and slavery, they talked about the queen in the other way than the head teacher and English teacher has explained her. English inspector hiding the truths of past and indentured slavery glorifies the queen and empire by saying, "She was your queen and my queen and yours no less than mine . . . The British Empire you must remember, has always worked for the peace of the world. This was the job assigned to it by god . . . You are with us and we are with you" (35). Further the oppressor's views are shared by the black head teacher of the school while distributing pennies to the participant boys on the Empire Day as, "It's the gift of the Queen, and a great Queen she was . . . You must all when you go to spend your penny think before you throw it away. Queen Victoria was a wise queen, and she would have you spend it wisely" (40). The people whom the boys have overheard believed Queen to be good as she freed them from slavery. But they have been unable to grasp the concept of slavery thinking that how can a man be the slave of other. They have started to perceive the concept of slavery in their own way which makes them feel even more disturbed and confused. The boys have witnessed the prisoners of the jail several times and they understood the difference between what they have seen and what the old woman has been talking about, they have sensed that the old people have been discussing something bigger than merely being sentenced to jail. The whites have portrayed Britain and England since ages in such a way that even the teachers at the school could not answer the boys' questions regarding slavery and they too believe that the phenomenon of slavery existed before the Battle of Hastings and William the conqueror that have been mentioned in their texts, being such an ancient happening they believe it could not be entered in their texts. Regarding the women who has been talking about slavery the teacher says that she must be foolish to say that she was a slave once. On questioning

the teacher regarding slavery he gets the answer:

It was a long, long, long time ago. It had nothing to do with the old lady. And moreover it had nothing to do with the people in Barbados. No one there was ever a slave. It was in another part of the world that those things happened. Not in little England. . . . It was too far back to anyone to worry about teaching it as a history. History has to begin somewhere, but not so far back. And nobody knew where this slavery business took place. The old woman, poor fool! You could forgive her. She must have a dream, a bad dream. (57)

Fanon's observation can be applied to this false representation of western culture by the Britishers, according to him "As soon as the colonized begin to strain at the leash and to pose a threat to the colonist, they are assigned a series of good souls who in the 'Symposiums on Culture' spell out the specificity and richness of Western values" (*Wretched of the Earth* 8). In the particular narrative whenever the school boys or the natives start realizing the evil face of the colonial, the foreign rulers always have been found ready to influence the black natives with the supposition that the white culture is superior to the black one. In Fanon's words "Every effort is made to make the colonized confess the inferiority of their culture, now reduced to a set of instinctive responses, to acknowledge the unreality of their nation and, in the last extreme, to admit the disorganized, half-finished nature of their own biological makeup" (*Wretched of the Earth* 171). The events in the narrative have created a doubt in the boys' consciousness, now they could realize that slavery existed somewhere on the earth and it may be in Barbados too. It is quite complex for a nation to establish its cultural identity when its people are purposefully kept away from knowing its history and the atrocities done to their slave forefathers. The English ability to retain hegemony over their former colonies posed a major impediment in creation of a distinct Caribbean identity.

In Nineteenth century different scholars put forth their ideas on racial prejudices and social hierarchy through

numerous periodicals and paper. Professor Wohl in his article, *The Function of Racism in Victorian England* argues that:

To denigrate or point up the bestial, brute, savage nature of an outside group is to point up our own advanced state and protect ourselves against inner fears or tensions. Racism and class prejudice, in other words, not only serve as agents of political power, but also serve as buffers between a community and a nature that seems to be getting too close to it for psychological comfort. (Thakarar 38)

In this novel during the celebration of Empire day the hostility of the blacks towards the whites and vice versa is portrayed through the characters of English Inspector and Head Teacher. The Head Teacher of the school who belongs to black race while sharing the stage with the Inspector felt inferior to him. For the whole time the Inspector has been on the stage none of the students dared to whisper a word indicating the superiority and authority of the White rulers. The behaviour of Head Teacher, boys and other teachers who were among the villagers throughout the stretch depicted their obedience and submission to the supremacy of the white rulers and their representatives in the village. The stress of English Inspector's tyrannical presence in front of the boys and teachers has been demonstrated by Lamming in a parade scene when the terror struck teachers get baffled in giving the commands to the boys and boys too contradicted in their actions. "The teachers' voices were raised in a confusion of orders to the squads. They spoke at the same time but the orders were different and the movements of the squads taken on the whole were contradictory" (36). This event enraged the Inspector and simultaneously scared the Head Teacher who would be rebuked for this insulting conduct. Just after the parade both were found engaged in an apparently comfortable talk that can be viewed as the best illustration of racial animosity between blacks and whites:

They made a striking contrast in appearance, but they seemed in a way to belong to the same thing. . . . It was pleasing to watch them talk in that way the villagers called

man to man, although it didn't seemed altogether a case of man to man. They watched each other at times as a cat would watch a mouse, playfully but seriously. The inspector smiled and the head teacher smiled back, and the cat in each smiled too. It was not an assuring smile. It was not inconceivable that the cat would spring and suck the blood of the other. (37)

This depiction of these two characters here can be regarded as black and white races where Head teacher is the representative of Black race and the Inspector representing the entire white colonizers, indicating the mutual hostility of the two races for each other. The white inspector trying to compel his authority and suppression over the native Head Teacher who in turn glowers at him with equal resentment portraying the resistance of the natives towards the white colonizers. The school's Head Teacher realizes that however he belongs to the native's elite class and shares the colonizers view still he is not treated and accepted equally by the colonizers which infuriates him.

Head teacher and overseers in the narrative serve as Fanon's native of *Black Skin, White Masks* who for the sake of foreign culture and tradition shun their own, in Fanon's words applies the "White Mask" on his black skin. The Head Teacher and overseers in the novel too have adopted foreign traditions and practices, being among the few native elites of the village they had power and authority. Head Teacher imitates the whites by showing his fierceness on the school boys and by keeping servants at his house which is unusual for his race in Carrington while the overseers who have been given the task of patrolling the land and scaring away the most unsafe natives by the white ruler are aggressive and strict towards the people of their own race.

Overseers were themselves villagers who were granted special favors like attending on the landlady, or owning after twenty years' tenure the spot of land on which their house was built. . . . The overseers carried bunches of keys strung on wire which they chimed continually, partly to warn the villagers of

their approach and partly to satisfy themselves with the feel of authority. (21)

Wearing the "White Mask" the teacher wants the boys of his school to treat they do by the English Inspector, for that he has always rendered himself harshly among the students as a result the boys are afraid of him yet they are not obedient to him as they are towards the Inspector. Fanon states:

The black man wants to be white. The white man slaves to reach a human level . . . There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men. There is another fact: Black man want to prove to white man, at all costs, the richness of their thoughts, the equal value of their intellect . . .

For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. (*Black Skin, White Masks* 11-12)

In the light of this statement of Fanon we can analyze that in the racist societies like in the Lamming's narrative whites are much privileged than the blacks creating circumstances for the whites to pose themselves superior to the Others. Therefore the black people who have been suppressed over the ages want power and supremacy and aspire to be white as whiteness for them represents authority. In the novel the Head Teacher and the overseers desire to be like the whites but their wish remains unfulfilled because in the process of becoming white they become hybridized and not exactly the white. Fanon further observes that in the process of dehumanizing the blacks, the whites too face dehumanization. Overseers and the Head of the school want to be like whites so they imitate the colonizers ways, Homi Bhabha terms this imitation as "Mimicry". The natives do so because whiteness in the Caribbean society is believed to be virtuous and powerful. Knowing the fact that they are black they have to fight hard all the time to escape the fact of blackness which is to be repeated again and again as they never successfully attain the whiteness, making them "obsessive". However this obsession according to Fanon becomes a neurotic condition in the blacks as escaping the Blackness in pursuit of becoming white is losing and escaping from self. Fanon argues,

The negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behaves in accordance with a neurotic orientation. . . . The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European's feeling of superiority. Let us have the courage to say it outright: *It is the racist who creates his inferior.* (*Black Skin, White Masks* 93)

Fanon's argument implies that the difference between the white and black races is not natural rather it is created by the whites considering their superiority over the blacks. Racism constructs the social order in which blacks are placed at the bottom as a result enforcing inferiority on them that they incorporate with time. In the case of *In the Castle of My Skin* this feeling of inferiority can be found among all the natives, Head of the school and overseer although have been placed higher to the common villagers in the hierarchy of blacks yet they remain at the base level for the whites. Both the Head and the overseers impose their authority over the blacks of the village but in front of the whites they constantly feel degraded and inferior. Head Teacher and the overseers have been given the powers that they could exercise over the blacks only but can't access these powers against the whites and like the whites. This sense of inferiority and powerlessness results in the outbreak of violence among the native elites of the narrative, they wish to direct towards their anger and violence towards the oppressive colonizers but failing to do so erupts it on their own people.

Conclusion

Postcolonial literature, as we can say that, is the saga of expressions either it is expressed by the means of films or writings, of the people of those countries that have been previously dominated by the British Empire. *In the Castle of My Skin* portrays how the colonizers subjugated and humiliated the ones they ruled, it has happened in all the postcolonial societies and not only the particular island about which Lamming has written in the novel. Lamming here has acted as the mouthpiece of all the oppressed classes who has suffered the consequences of colonialism. In the novel

Lamming has also hinted towards the impending neo-colonialism on the Caribbean islands where after the departure of English colonizers the powerful natives started torturing their own people. In this novel it has been depicted through Mr. Slime who initially seems to be helpful for villagers and he has been the main reason for the freedom of Creighton but towards the end of narrative it is revealed that it is he who is responsible for the homelessness of poor natives. He sells the houses and the land of powerless natives to the rich and powerful outsiders. Further Lamming has very artistically shown the mental sufferings and physical pains that the colonized people go through, they always strive to be happy and for that happiness they reject their own culture and values but later that becomes the cause of their mental stress. They for the sake of becoming like their colonial rulers start imitating them but at the end they are only able to become the 'mimic men', who is dangerous for colonizers but sometimes for himself to as it destroys his personal identity and leads him towards ambiguity.

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