

# A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF GEORGE LAMMING'S NOVEL: "IN THE CASTLE OF MY SKIN"

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to read George Lamming's novel *In the Castle of My Skin* in the light of postcolonial theory. Lamming in his novel explores the colonial experience and its effects on the social, moral and cultural life of colonized people. This paper employs the key concepts of postcolonial theory such as race, identity, third-space and hybridity to analyze the narrative of the novel.

**Keywords:** Racism, identity, third-space, hybridity, resistance.

## INTRODUCTION

The term postcolonial is not used in the paper as a post independence phenomenon. It has been used to discuss the experiences of the people who at one time were colonized by the Europeans. In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* postcolonialism is defined as:

Postcolonial as we define it does not mean 'post-independence' or 'after colonialism' for this would be to falsely ascribe an end to the colonial process. Post-colonialism, rather, begins from the very first moment of the colonial contact. It is the discourse of oppositionality which colonization brings into being. (Ashcroft 117)

*Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts* asserts that:

The term Postcolonialism deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies of the ex-colonies...the term was used by the literary critics in 1970s to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization....Post colonialism is now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects... (Ashcroft 204-205)

Thus, the postcolonial literature includes the literary writings by the people belonging to former European colonies and their literature deals with the issues of race, oppression, hybridity, identity, language, culture etc.

*In the Castle of My Skin* is largely build around the concept of identity, mimicry, hybridity, third-space, ambivalence etc. G. the protagonist of the story has spent his childhood in crisis because his father left him the sole liability of his mother and it is she who has really played the role of his father. G. by birth is a hybrid character as his father is a white man and mother a mixed lady of white and black descent. Since his childhood G. faces the problem of identity as he does not know anything about his father. The character of G. is based on Lamming which makes it an autobiographical novel. Like G., Lamming himself has felt the sense of alienation and identity loss. Regarding identity of the blacks P. K. Nayar quotes Fanon in his work as:

When the colonial paints the native as evil, pagan and primitive, over a period of time the native begins to accept this prejudiced and racialised view as true. As a result the native comes to see himself as evil, pagan and primitive. The black man loses his self identity because he can only see himself through the eyes of the white man. (157)

In search of identity, G. starts going to school and at high school he learns about his ancestral slave identity which was previously unknown to him. His friend Trumper leaves for America to find his own identity and on returning back tells G. that if he wants to know about himself, he must leave his village Carrington and should learn about his *race*. Searching for identity, G. then prepares to leave his country and plans to go to Trinidad. G. at the end of novel expresses his hope of finding his identity and says:

When I reach Trinidad where no one knows me I may be able to strike identity with the other person. But it was never possible here. I am always feeling terrified of being known; not because they really know you, but simply because their claim to this knowledge is a concealed attempt to destroy you. That is what knowing means... Tomorrow I leave... they won't know you, the you that's hidden somewhere in the castle of your skin. (Wheat qtd. *In the Castle of My Skin*)

Like G, many other children in the novel are hybrid and seek their true identity. They discuss about their real father as their mothers have relations outside their marriage. They ask each-other, 'How many fathers you got in yuh family?' This lack of father figure and presence of negative father figures gives great set back to the lives of these children.

In the narrative the identity of Carrington is also shown as doubtful. Whites address native's village as 'Little England' but the school boys do not know anything about the 'Big England'. They can't understand the difference of 'Big England' and 'Little England'. Thus the formal education which the native boys were getting in the schools run by English missionaries was leading them to identity confusion. The things taught to them were not a part of their island life or their past history. They were taught about the queen, the bishop and England which they had never seen. Native school boys participated in empire day celebration and penny coins were rewarded to them, innocent natives had a little idea of these events and they blindly followed the instructions given to them. The education imparted to G. and the other boys at Groddeck's Boys School and High school also tries to erase their identity and to enslave them through western culture. The feelings of natives are conveyed through 'Shoemaker' who is the representative of new generation and is conscious about the false trust on Big England. He feels that their historical great heroes like Marcus Garvey find no place in the school books. He believes that the real motive of Christian missionary schools is to promote foreign culture and language by erasing the culture of natives. He thinks that the natives should no more act as servants but fight for their true identity and rights. K.H. Attar's idea about West Indian identity is quoted by Sangita T. Ghodake in her article as, "The colonial political systems transformed the ex-slave community from the condition of non-identity to the condition of the illusory English identity" (11).

*In the Castle of My Skin* also sheds light on the notion of third-space or existence of resistance among the colonized natives. In the novel the resistance of people of Carrington towards the English education system is shown. This resistance is reflected in the character of Shoemaker. He says, "They ain't got no chance to go to high school an' get the sort of job respectable people gets, but you can give them something as good. A good trade and some facts 'bout the world" (Lamming 102). Shoemaker thinks that no matter how hard a native does in his studies, higher posts will be occupied by the whites. He feels that even if the natives receive higher education, their advancement is not possible because of their black color. In his views, the sort of higher education provided to villagers by the English missionaries is of no use for the common villagers because it provides them the knowledge about the world which is unknown to them or not accessible to them. The shoemaker believes that for making of one's life, it is better to teach him trade or craft, rather than admitting him to high school. Holásek has mentioned C. L. R. Campbell's argument in his thesis as: "In the Caribbean, there was a chance for a white boy to get a good job and a respectable position in society, but not for the blacks. As hard as they tried, the non-whites, even if they were smart and educated, could at best achieve to be civil servants, handling meaningless paperwork" (13).

Further, the natives express their resistance by showing disrespect for the authorities. Lamming shows this disrespect and hostility through the relation of overseers and the common villagers. Overseers were the villagers appointed by English authorities to act as supervisors or patrolling policemen, to enforce laws of the colonizers upon their own countrymen. The disrespect of the villagers was retaliated by the overseers. This mutual hostility can be seen everywhere in the narrative. This relation of hate is described by Lamming as: “The average villager showed little respect for the overseer unless threatened or actually bullied... Each represented for the other the image of the enemy. And the enemy was to be destroyed or placated. The overseer was either authoritarian or shrewd. The villager hostile or obsequious.” (Lamming 26). Besides the resistance for education system and disrespect towards authorities, opposition and negative feelings of the native boys towards the government officials are also shown in the novel. Once G. gets late to reach home and plans to tell a lie to his mother. The comments of G’s friends on his behavior reveal their feelings for the government officials. Boy Blue, Trumper and Bob think that lawyers and politicians are liars. They comment on G. as:

‘You goin’ to be a lawyer,’ Boy Blue said.

‘Or a politician,’ Trumper said.

‘Tis the same thing by a different name, ‘ Bob said, ‘Tis the same thing since they both equal to blasted liar.’ (Lamming 158)

Further, the problem of *race*, *complexion* and *otherness* are crucial features of postcolonialism which are clearly visible in the novel. The title of the novel itself is related to protagonist’s skin color and the Caribbean race. The title ‘*In the Castle of My Skin*’ is taken from a phrase in a poem written by Derek Walcott. “You in the Castle of your skin, I among the swineherd” (Wheat). Lamming has used the phrase “in the castle of my skin” to suggest the Caribbean skin color. The importance of skin color is discussed in the novel when G. visits a doctor in an emergency and is successfully treated by the doctor. While getting treated G. expresses his wish of becoming a doctor. Hearing this, doctor replies that G. cannot become a doctor because he does not have fair skin. It is clear from the doctor’s statement that color is the only hindrance in the way of climbing up the ladder of society. Color of natives is the cause of *otherness* for them, they are facing discrimination because they are not whites but the *others*. G’s wish of becoming a doctor for earning a living reveals his feelings for the white color. Here the doctor’s profession represents the ‘white mask’ which a black skinned native wants to wear to become superior. But according to doctor’s words this mask is not suitable for G. He makes G. feel that because of his black color he will always remain inferior to the whites. This incident can be interpreted in the light of Fanon’s “Black Skin, White Masks” and Bhaba’s concept of “Mimicry”. The natives try to imitate the foreign culture, language, tradition and practices by shunning their own values and culture, but being unable to mimic the whites exactly and the white mask not fitting on them properly, they become hybrid characters. Gareth Giffiths asserts that, “through the processes of colonization in the region the Caribbean natives have inherited the racial ideology of the colonizer” (80).

The novel points to several instances when the villagers show prejudice to their own black color, one such instance is when the narrator says:

‘Every child in the village had a stock response for the colour, black. We had taken in like our daily bread a kind of infectious amusement about the colour, black...No black boy wanted to be white, but it was also true that no black boy like the idea of being black. Brown skin was a satisfactory compromise, and brown skin meant a mixture of white and black.’ (Wheat qtd. *In the Castle of My Skin*)

All Caribbean countries share the history of slavery and this dark side of colonialism is also portrayed by postcolonial writers. Although *In the Castle of My Skin* doesn’t depict the problems of slavery directly, it is revealed through the memories and interaction of characters with each other. The topic of slavery was usually avoided by the colonizers. It was not even included in the school books because Englishmen did not want the natives to know about the cruelties done to them. The theme of slavery surfaces in the novel when a head teacher starts discussing it at the parade. One of the boys unfamiliar to slavery asks the teacher to explain the meaning of slavery, but the teacher’s explanation leaves him more puzzled. Upon further questioning the teacher ignores the topic and replies that slavery is of no importance, because it happened long time ago. Later he distorts many historical facts for preserving the image of

England and the queen, it was clear from the teacher's statement that the Englishmen were infusing a fake sense of loyalty among the natives.

## CONCLUSION

*In the Castle of My Skin* is a powerful expression of postcolonial resistance. Lamming's discursive exposes the subtle strategies of suppression adopted by the colonial masters to marginalize and degrade the Caribbean natives socially, culturally, economically and politically. Lamming revisits the Barbadian history to locate the fractures and ambivalence within the colonial discourse.

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