

THE WEST INDIAN EMERGES: GEORGE LAMMING'S IN THE CASTLE OF MY SKIN

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Abstract

George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, first published in 1953, is a seminal work in West Indian and Post-Colonial literature. It precedes and establishes the foundational themes that are central to the works of V.S. Naipaul, Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott, and a host of the most incisive West Indian writers. This article explores the West Indian's muscular heave to emerge from the horror that is West Indian history. The West Indian, embodied in the protagonist named G, must overcome a sense of loss, a sense of fragmentation and rootlessness in order that he approach the world with wholeness and hope. This struggle continues in this new age of ours, and remains as relevant to us as West Indians as it was during and immediately after Colonialism. A critical exploration of this novel may be more urgent now than it was when it was first published.

Keywords: Post-colonial literature, rootlessness, themes, analysis, colonialism.

INTRODUCTION

George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin* explores the development of the consciousness of the narrator, G, within the milieu of a Barbadian village in the 1930's.¹ He seeks, within the microcosm of his individual consciousness, for the identical societal, actual, and psychological permanence and continuity that is exemplified by the White landlord Creighton and the old Black couple, Ma and Pa. G quests for continuity, for a sense of self and a physical and psychological affiliation with a land that he may term home; that kind of permanence which the pebble (a symbol that has come to assume great significance in West Indian literature) has come to represent. The very form of *In the Castle of my Skin* obeys a deep-seated need to re-state history by investing it with a profundity brought about by demonstrating the relationship between historical fact and personal anecdote. The novel, by its very autobiographical nature, represents an adult's backward grope into realms of memory, tracing its evolution by placing it against a dynamic backdrop of historical and social circumstances. The individual carries within himself the implications of the generic as well as the specific. In *Castle of my Skin* takes up the evolving consciousness of the narrator as he sits and looks at his ninth birthday being rained away. From the very beginning of the novel, G's participation is more internal than not, and his impact on the outer world is only minimal. The first paragraph of the book is laden with images of inevitability: rain, the passage of time, poverty, the mother figure, and religion. And in the face of these ubiquitous aspects of West Indian life, we are told, "I wept for the watery waste of my ninth important day." The futility of striving in the face of abject poverty and decay is beautifully demonstrated by the almost deliberate destructiveness of traditional sources of life the rain and the river by what appears to be an almost cosmic conflict with another ordinarily life-giving source, the earth itself. It becomes a cosmic conspiracy of conflict:

The white stalks of the lily lay flat under the hammering rain, then coaxed their roots from the earth and drifted across the

upturned clay, into the canals and on to the deep black river where by agreement the floods converged. The water rose higher and higher until the fern and flowers on our veranda were flooded. It came through the creases of the door, and expanded across the uncarpeted borders of the floor. (9)

The flood at the beginning of *Castle* has been looked at by various critics for its social and symbolic implications. Charles Larson concludes after brief analysis: "Thus, at the outset water imagery becomes a leitmotif to symbolize a time of change in the village."² Similarly, Gerald Moore stipulates:

The book begins with a great flood, announcing the ninth birthday of the fatherless only child who looks out upon the waste of waters carrying everything away. So that flood becomes the first great climactic announcing change.³

But it is Ngugi Wa Thiong'o who has perceived the commencement of organic decay that coincides with the beginning of the novel: "The restless note is struck at the very beginning: looking at the rain, the hero can see the raindrops in terms of his interior life..." And at the end of the novel, "not only the boy's childhood, but an organic way of life has ended."⁴ Ngugi asks two questions that are of importance for an understanding of the novel: "What is this organic life, and what are the forces disturbing it?"⁵ But even this is rather easily perceived and Ngugi stops at rational criticism, refusing to commit a leap into somewhat more disturbing but ultimately more fulfilling criticism. Moreover, in an article that is otherwise plagued with inaccuracies and contradictions, Ambrose Kom shows perceptiveness and objectivity in writing:

The torrential rain which falls at the beginning of the novel is undoubtedly the harbinger of an incipient malaise. The flood which follows is a natural disorder that probably announces the end of an era or the imminent disintegration of the little community's traditional structures.⁶

The article goes on to point out briefly some Shakespearean echoes. But the fact is that the flood carries, in addition, Biblical

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associations implying a dramatization of the dialectical relationships between beginning and end, and life and death. The Biblical character that comes to mind is, of course, Noah. Like Noah's world, G's is thrown into upheaval: "The floods could level the stature and even conceal the identity of the village." This point is briefly looked at by Dubem Okafor in an incisive article. This critic agrees, "The novel... begins with a diminutive deluge, reminiscent of the waters of Genesis in the time of Noah."⁷ Noah's beginning contains the end of another life, his new lease on life encircles and involves the death of the other: his world is a liquid womb that merges these principles that were allowed to become absolute and authoritarian. In the light of these paradoxes, it is significant that the flood occurs at the beginning of the text on G's birthday in the sense that, while the flood points toward a social upheaval, it also indicates an impending one in the consciousness of the boy: the dialogue of dialectics addresses both the specific and the generic. The very important concepts of time and re-creativity etch themselves into his mind as the village is inundated: "The clock shelved in one corner kept up its ticking. My mother retreated to another part of the house where the silk and taffeta designs of her needling were being revised and reversed. I soon followed like a trail of smoke tracing a radius round its red origin." (12)

In this atmosphere, recorded in symbolic terms, G attempts to establish his sense of self out of an affiliation with immediate ancestral relationships. He begins by groping in the darkness of memory but this is, ironically, hindered by his mother who initiates a song (almost certainly a hymn) which the village takes up. Having had his intuitive backward glance obstructed, G substitutes a more conscious type of inquiry, only to discover family ties that are unknown and dissipated. It is in this way that G is a silhouette of the homeless, dispossessed Black man who has been wrenched from his home in Africa. This shadowy affiliation creates of him the incoherent exile that he is and so inevitably colours his future. This theme of homelessness and the futile attempts at creating a home in social and psychological terms on the highly dubious foundations of acquiescence and complacency are structurally juxtaposed alongside the tragedy of Mr. Foster who externally dramatizes the wretch. G's mother is told about Foster's house being swept away in the floods, but "Foster swear he won't leave the old house, and went sailing down the river on the roof. They had to fish him from the Deanery wall with a rope." Foster tenaciously holds onto the only object that gives him a sense of rootedness, of being, but the object itself, like the very structure of the village, totters precariously on the precipice of annihilation. There is, therefore, an internal as well as external attempt at the creation of a sense of self and home, at arresting the sense of impermanence that plagues the West Indian. Each aspect mirrors the other, placing each in context while retaining an unshakeable but tremendously distant and vague sense of self. Both are living fossils that have remained out of the evolution of an exploitative, self-shattering process. Finally, the important figures of Ma and Pa are introduced: "They were the oldest couple in the village, so old no one could tell their age, and few knew what names they had besides those we had given them, Ma and Pa" (14). They are portrayed as spiritually powerful and speak with the diminished strength of ancestral voices: strong because they are closest to Africa (and therefore to a sense of home) both in terms of sensibility and age; and diminished because they are closest to the demeaning fact of slavery. These are the characters that dramatize the social, historical, political, and anecdotal milieu in which the evolving consciousnesses of G, Boy Blue, Bob, and Trumper develop and with which they interweave themselves.

They all represent attempts at reconciling their state of fragmentation and homelessness. At times these attempts are admirable heroic even at others perverted; but always there seems to be some malevolent spectre that haunts them and renders their attempts futile. Part of the significance of Castle, therefore, is Lamming's attempt at a restatement of West Indian history through a complex interweaving of two aspects of the birth of the people. Lamming points to the fact that, when history is taken in isolation, when the documentation of historical fact becomes an obsession that denies the imaginative, personal evolution of a people, then it becomes a strangling fictive archetype. Lamming juxtaposes historical fact alongside anecdotal, undocumented events that affect the society and the individual. One obtains, therefore, two evolving recollections within one embracing, more realistic archetype. It is in Chapter Two that this design is made clear. The narrator tells the amusing story of being bathed by his mother in full view of the neighbours, an occurrence typical of West Indian communal village life. But to say that, because of such scenes in the village, "...life is characterized primarily by daily routine and the deep harmony of social relationships which, it seems, is the modest heritage of the African civilization from which the villager's happy descendants descend," is to be both Romantic and naive.⁸ Lamming himself undermines the humour as well as the "happiness" by introducing the image of the pebble: "The pebbles loosened by moisture from the earth slipped beneath my feet...The pebbles shifted under my heels...the pebbles reassorted" (16). G, like the village itself, literally and figuratively, stands on shaky ground. The fact that he is being "drowned" in water is not insignificant, in view of the flood and its symbolic overtones that have been examined earlier. Moreover, the death of the pumpkin-vine undermines the general "happy" mood with the uneasiness and sense of futility that the death of organic life can evoke:

'Look what they do,' she said, letting the snapped vine slip between her fingers. 'They kill it, and it was just going to bear.'

Suddenly the whole morning had changed.

'What they do?' the neighbour asked keeping her balance above the fence.

'Kill the pumpkin vine,' my mother said, turning away from the fence with hardened indifference. 'Why the hell anybody worry to plant anything round here only God knows.'

Now the voice spoke as if from an inner void beyond which deeper and deeper within herself were incalculable layers of feeling. (17)

So that later, when the fence separating G's yard from the neighbour's crashes and "the two yards merged," it does imply a greater closeness of existence, but this is also symbolic of a communal, widening futility. Here, the breaking of a barrier implies a shared and magnified imprisonment. This event is of importance because it is the single episode in which any of the villagers (with the exception of Ma and Pa) attempt a fruitful consummation out of their forced attachment to the land. The attempt at establishing a fulfilling symbolic relationship with the land ends with a withering vine. Significantly, it is only Pa who is shown to be rooted enough in the land to be able to rear goats, pigeons and cultivate a vegetable patch.⁹ This pattern, which implies the paradox of the illusion of wholeness and at the same time a real imprisonment, is dramatized by G's mother, Miss Foster, and Bob's mother:

They sat in a circle composed and relaxed...It seemed they were three pieces in a pattern which remained constant. The

flow of its history was undisturbed by any difference in the pieces, nor was its evenness affected by any likeness. There was a difference and there was not difference. (24)

This, again, has been looked at by critics in a rather superficial manner: Kenneth Ramchand¹⁰ sees the pattern as symbolic of the unity of the villagers, while Kom recognizes an implied unity, interdependence and rootedness in the soil.¹¹ But the unity is a superficial one. Later, under the pressure of change, the fabric of the society, like G's mother's needling, becomes "revised and reversed," while Pa is indeed rooted in the soil, possessing that kind of spiritual strength, a relative psychical intactness which the villagers have lost. To say that the villagers are "solidly rooted in the soil which their slave ancestors formerly created"¹² is to be blind to the fact that the villagers are tied to the land in much the same way that the slaves were because of the perpetuation of the tyrannical social and psychological architecture that was created by colonial exploitation. The feudal relationship between Creighton and the villagers carry many of the characteristics which existed in pre-Emancipation West Indies. The geometric pattern that the three women form is the super-structural, stated pattern of a circle; but the circle, paradoxical symbol that it is, withholds its liberating facet. Even more important is the fact that they recreate at the sub-structural level the pattern of a triangle. And this is of absolute importance because it is a re-dramatization of the figure formed by the horrifying slave trade the triangular journey made by European ships coming out of that continent, travelling on their sinister path to the West Coast of Africa, then undertaking the infamous Middle Passage to the so-called New World, having gorged their holds with human cargo, and then finally back to Europe. So that while the recreated sub-structural triangular form implies the perpetuation of the exploitative model initiated by the slave trade, the recreated super-structural form of the circle, with its liberating qualities precluded, ensures the imprisonment rather than "symbolize(s) the women's own deep-rootedness and...interdependence."¹³ The figure they form, therefore, is the symbolic correlative of a historical process. This is precisely why the "three" repeats itself and is a mathematical magnification of its horrifying implications. The three is constant but evolves into figures that are of greater value:

There was no change in the increase...the meaning was not clear to them. It was not their concern, and it would never be. Their consciousness had never been quickened by the fact of life to which these confidences might have been a sure testimony...Three. Thirteen. Thirty. Three hundred. (24-25)

This, surely, is indicative of the perpetuation, the constant recycling of imprisoning and exploitative archetypes, each consolidating and extending its previous manifest image. And so this symbolic human, "present" formation, clearly historical in its echo, may be described in these terms by George Lamming: "The flow of its history was undisturbed by any difference in the pieces...There was a difference and there was no difference" (24). The "peace" and "unity" which seem to pervade the village is a stifling oppression, and the tragedy is that the villagers themselves are unaware of this alienation. They are blind to themselves, blind to the myth that relegates them to being "low-down nigger people" and "my people, the enemy." Indeed, this myth "had eaten through their consciousness like moths through the pages of ageing documents" (27). The education system, the public bath, the religion, the role of the overseer thrust upon him and embraced by him, the accepted superiority of the White man,

the title of Little England taken on by Barbados, and the pride of being a faithful child to Big England are all symptoms of the cancerous pattern which had absorbed them and blinded them to themselves.

One typical incident is told about the boys at school who cannot conceptualise the very idea of slavery:

He [the pupil] told the teacher what the old woman had said. She was a slave. And the teacher had said she was getting dotish. It was a long, long, long time ago. People talked of slaves a long time ago. It had nothing to do with the old lady. She wouldn't be old enough. And moreover it had nothing to do with the people in Barbados. No one there was ever a slave, the teacher said...Not in Little England...Thank God nobody in Barbados was ever a slave. (57)

What has been implanted in the teacher and handed down to the pupils is the illusion of a sense of self and cultural continuity by being an offspring of England. And this is the kind of strangling delusion that impedes any sort of insight into one's dilemma and of a true sense of history out of which the self may have evolved and in which context it must place itself. The power of the delusion undermines the West Indian and throws him into an abysmal area of loss. It is only out of a profound awareness of the nature of the Void—an intimate knowledge of the creation of this area of nothingness—that may allow the West Indian to recall not the illusion of wholeness, but a recreated density of self and a home for that self, however elusive, however vague this may be.

Lamming allows the students to stumble onto an awareness of the exploitative nature of Christianity in the West Indies. The religion is itself inextricably bound to colonialism:

They have put the two of them together now. The empire and the garden. We are to speak of both of them in the same way. They belong to the same person. They belong to God. The garden is God's own garden and the empire is God's only empire. They work together for us. God save the king who will help us to see the garden again. But the old woman wasn't wrong. We are slaves. We are still slaves to these two. And we are happy to be slaves. (71)

The seemingly endless cycle of exploitation, however, does evolve into a new phase, even as the villagers begin awakening to a sense of their own dispossession, their own homelessness. The prophetic note is struck, ironically, by Miss Foster because of the attention paid her by the landlord. Mr. Foster's house has been swept away by the flood and, as assistance, Creighton offers Miss Foster the comfort of prayer, a cup of tea, and "half a crown sixty cents, believe it or not: 'You never know what coming to you in the world' she said, '...you down today, you up tomorrow'" (34). And the introspective consciousness of the narrator records:

The landlord. The overseer. The flood. Miss Foster. Bob's mother, my mother. Not thirteen but three. They were silent now. You down today, you up tomorrow. And in that brief silence they seemed to wonder what would happen tomorrow. (34)

Tomorrow and political change arrive with the emergence of Mr. Slime. This character represents the kind of aspiring bourgeois opportunist which the West Indies experienced with the first tremors of self-awareness. But the very premise that

springboards Slime into the political arena is a highly dubious one. Slime is forced to quit teaching because of a possible adulterous relationship with the head teacher's wife. He initiates the Friendly Society and Penny Bank and then goes further by saying "how he goin' to make us owners o' this land" (79). This idea of ownership of land by the masses would, of course, involve the implementation of an entirely new and radical social and political structure. Moreover, the symbols of land and house are devices pointing towards a reintegrated self and therefore the redemption of self. Slime's power increases as he calls a strike against Creighton's shipping company; and out of his organization, the masses become vaguely conscious of their own potential. The shoemaker tells his striking friends:

'If you ain't there to unload these boats, Christ, they can't unload themselves. And the Great can't do it. They can give orders and all that, but they can't do one honest day's work.' (96)

But the strikers' potential is at once vaguely envisioned and hopelessly harnessed. The potential for independence becomes treacherous because of the disillusionment brought about by Slime's mutilation of the trust they have placed in him. The replacement of a Creighton with Slime bodes ill for the villagers:

'Seems to me there is only two great men round here,' said Boy Blue, 'Mr. Slime an' the landlord. An' if you don't watch out there goin' soon be one, Mr. Slime only. The landlord will sort o' stay where he is in the big house, but Mr. Slime will be sort o' captain o' this ship.' (167)

Slime maintains bargaining links with the colonial class. At the height of the strike, "a small delegation among whom were Mr. Slime and another politician, had gone to the Governor's House to get the Governor's advice on the calling of the strike" (199). This occurs because the type of transitional figure that Slime represents seeks change but not meaningful changes.¹⁴ The homelessness and alienation of the masses is a condition which may be exploited. He is not possessed of the powerful intensity of the workers whom he leads. When the riots begin, "The politicians disappeared appalled and terrified" (200). The superficial commitment of the politicians precludes them from responding as the workers do or, for that matter, from understanding such a response. They cannot begin to contain such intensity. It is therefore surprising that Ambrose Kom can write: "As a skilful politician Slime does contain the local workers' uprising."¹⁵ The scene that indicates the different directions in which the participants will move occurs as the landlord walks through the village into an ambush set up by the urban workers, while the villagers remain locked in their houses. The landlord makes his appearance:

The terror on his face was indescribable. His clothes were soiled, and he stepped with the uncertainty of a drunken person. The men waited...His face was as white as a pebble. He approached the corner where the roads made four and the men turned round to aim...He had reached the corner where the roads made four...Mr. Slime turned the corner. He waited at the corner where the roads made four and then walked towards the men...the Landlord didn't look back...Then all eyes were fastened on Mr. Slime. His head spun with the terror and confusion of the scene. He didn't know what he should do...They watched his face for a signal as the landlord walked exhausted and stupid through the wood...entered the track and was almost out of sight. No

stone had been "fired"...He had escaped. Mr. Slime sighed as he reached the men who looked disappointed, angry and above all obedient. 'Thank you,' he said, 'I'm glad you didn't do it.' (206-207)

It is quite obvious that they are all caught at a historical and symbolic cross-road. The workers reveal their indecisiveness and their dependence on Slime. The villagers re-dramatize their role as shut-in victims of circumstances, doomed to ineffectuality. Slime shows his own ambivalence and insecurity. And the landlord, now himself diminished and human, walks back to his house on the hill. Quite significantly, the next chapter emphasizes the changelessness of the situation: "The years had changed nothing. The riots were not repeated. The landlord remained. Pa was asleep and his snore was the same". (209)

Nevertheless, one is aware of another paradox here, which is the logical follow-up to the shifting of focus in the ambush incident. The omniscient vision of the narrator shifts almost unperceptively from the landlord to Slime, thereby indicating a certain sameness, and yet a definite difference between the two. The historical, traditional architecture is essentially the same, but the primary oppressor has changed. The point here is that the narrator is correct and inaccurate at the same time. For the masses, "the years had changed nothing"; their role as victim is restated and reinforced. Contiguously, things have changed: one oppressor has been replaced by another, and the new order is committed to the perpetuation of the old homelessness of the masses. The Shoemaker is the first casualty. Told by his "black landlord" that he must remove his house from the land in three weeks; the second casualty, Foster, sums up the people's attachment to land and house:

If there's one golden rule we all on this land got, tis this: if the good God give you health and strength, work till you can get yuhself a shelter over yuh head by day, and a corner to rest yuh bones at night. And when once you get it, give the good God thanks and never get rid of it. (240)

Mr. Foster recalls to the new owner of the land the incident at the beginning of the novel when his house was swept away by the flood. He concludes by telling the man: "You can do what you please, but I tell you that to let you know what a house mean to some people in this corner of God's earth". (240). The two incidents involving the Shoemaker and Mr. Foster are symbolic of a greater, more fundamental homelessness that resides in the constantly assaulted being of the villagers. They emphasize the kind of attachment that the new land-owning class cannot comprehend. For the villagers, "Dirt was cheap . . . and sand was free; but the land was the land, priceless, perennial and the symbol of some inexplicable power". (241) The final shocking irony comes home to the villagers as they read the handbill telling them that the land was bought with money from "the poor man's Penny Bank" and the "help Your Brother Friendly Society," organizations which they felt would help them to own the land. The last tragic casualty that Lamming tells of is Pa, who is to be sent to the Alms House. The news is broken by the head teacher who has apparently bought the land. In the conversation, Pa touches upon the treacherous relationship between Creighton and Slime, but he cannot really articulate the complexity and the painful consequences of the dispossession he is made to experience. In fact, Pa is voicing in his silence the tragic homelessness of a people that had manifested itself long before they could have articulated it. Both the head teacher and Pa are the victims, even though they are prescribed different roles in this

tragedy. The pebble, the permanence that is the “real you,” is unreachable because the sense of self has been submerged to an unfathomable depth. In the end, “The words are spoken and the gestures made, but they give no clue, and each knows that that other person is hidden somewhere”. The story of Creighton contains an incalculable paradox: the exploiter is himself a victim of the very architecture his forefathers created and which he has helped to perpetuate. The symbolic position of Creighton's brick building on the hill, the high fence of barbed wire and broken bottle that shields and imprisons him, that “castles” him, is indicative of an unbridgeable divide wrought from fear and prejudices that have been consolidated through the history of the West Indies. But there is a mysterious relationship which breaks through and repudiates these biases, allowing the White Creole to share in the burdens which he has helped to place on the backs of the villagers. Of course, one is all too aware of the difference between the landlord and the villagers, the exploiter and the exploited; but the participation in this exploitative archetype leads to an unpredictable sharing:

Whatever they endured the Creightons remained. It were as though the village were a disease which couldn't be rid of. They couldn't leave it any more than the Shoemaker or Mr. Foster or Pa himself. It held them as it held the villagers. Everyone said it had got into the blood. It was the soil of their roots. (230)

The dilemma of incoherence, fragmentation and homelessness are embodied in the consciousness of G. He is evidence of the maimed human image. In a sense, he is the image that witnesses its own destruction because what occurs in terms of his interiority is externalized in the homelessness of the villagers. Early in the novel, as the boys set out for the sea, G senses that “something was wrong”. He, like Pathe old and the young—cannot articulate the problem that resides within him but which also lies outside the scope of his logical comprehension:

Above us was the morning star hard and distant like a diamond. It had a quality of light like the dew, but did not shine. It seemed a solid, four-pointed flame that would crack under the hammer and scatter from the blow in a million splinters, each remaining solid and steady like the star itself. (109) It is as if he is looking into the morning sky of the West Indies and the West Indian and seeing the initial shattering blow the initial explosion, the resulting fragmentation, and the consolidation of the myriad of fragments. G has established an intuitive dialogue with other selves across the barriers of time; he has committed an intuitive leap backward in a subconscious effort to regain a pre-West Indian intactness of psyche. His vague but certain knowledge that “something was wrong” is born out of an authentic response to his individual image, the image of the West Indian. This is a direction-giving image, and the directions—the liquid leaps—fountain into the present ground upon which G stands and into the image that he is. The first direction springs from his present and states itself in terms of an unshakable potential for life; the second is rooted in and grows out of the deep and hazy past and flows forward into his present unfulfilled image: that of the fragmented and homeless but hopeful West Indian. This image is juxtaposed alongside the contrasting image of the doves which seem so absolutely at home:

Only the doves seemed to have found some peace in these surroundings . . . The brown bodies seemed to slope up all together to meet the blue-ringed necks and the heads that were neither round nor flat. The line was broken but the

movement was regular, as they crossed the green turf from one end to the other, keeping time with their coos and carrying in their eyes all the colours of the rainbow.

This, certainly, is the kind of relationship with his surroundings that dramatizes the aspiration of the disintegrated, dispossessed West Indian. It is not a statement of stasis of what he may become; rather, it is what he must push towards and then move forward again in an endeavour to obey the human need for a condition of constant becoming, a constant reassessment of self and the surroundings in which it finds itself. The doves do not surrender individual sovereignty, but it is the smooth wholeness of each that subscribes to the rhythm, the dynamism of the “all”. The geographic nature of this symbolic human hope for a sense of home should also be carefully considered: the disjointed archipelago that is the West Indies indeed contains “all colours of the rainbow,” a reference to the racial heterogeneity of the region. Ultimately, then, this vision of hope in *In the Castle of my Skin* reaches out of its specific circumstances to encompass the reintegration of all aspects of the West Indies. But it is a vague, implicit embrace. Very importantly, as G looks at the doves, it occurs to him that in the village the sparrows and black birds “which were the commonest victims of our snares had seldom been joined by the doves”. (111) There is a sense here, therefore, of home, security, and a commitment to the life of the “individual,” a powerful assertion that derives its strength from the collective rhythm. G, on the other hand, remains the isolated and vulnerable hopeful West Indian who is closer to the symbol/image of the crab. Michael Gilkes puts this well:

The frequently-used image of the sea-crab, with its awkward, halting progress, its sensitive, stalk-like eyes acting as perceptors for the vulnerable creature its protective shell, is closely linked with the personality of the novel's young hero, G . . .¹⁶

Having looked at the morning star and intuited its fragmentation, and having perceived the image of hope inherent in the animal inhabitants of the West Indies, G looks again into the sky (the “day” of the West Indies having progressed) and receives a vision that is of tremendous value in the context of Lamming's attempt at a restatement of history within a liberating, fulfilling historical archetype in which the dialectics of life interact with each other. G looks into the sky and sees a thick, white cloud in one part of the sky:

It seemed to be driven by some force outside it, but soon the wave burst from inside...it became thinner and whiter breaking up into shapes of islands and men and beasts, and the shapes disintegrated into specks that flew like spray in the face of the laughing sky. The sky was like a great big bully choosing the life and death of these tottering shapes. (111)

Then G looks at another part of the sky,

Where everything was more peaceful and the clouds were enacting a legend. On that side were the men and beasts. Under a lion's neck where the mane fell down in a thick fluff two lambs lay sleeping. The lion's skin pointed down to the basement of sky so that a space was formed that covered over and about the sleeping lambs. Some yards away two men were exchanging words in an altercation that involved life and death. It was on close examination that they were men, but the shapes were not satisfactory. The animals were more accurately constructed. The men looked disfigured. The light was unsteady, and the figures

seemed to take on different colours. One grew whiter and whiter...while the other became more thicker and cloudy as if it were ready to rain...The rain cloud had turned black with a full face and heavy like many a villager's. The figures were still, and they looked across at each other hard and steady as if they were involved in a common chaos which neither could understand but both greatly desired to redeem. They looked and their eyes were no longer there but they seemed to see in some other way, each the other! And as they looked the clouds curving over and about their heads made an arc of words that read: ARE YOU NOT A BROTHER? The shapes sharpened in outline, the white one getting heavier and darker; and finally they burst into broad trickles of rain that ran down the precipice of the sky...It was not clear who had spoken, and the clouds had written no answer. (111-112)

What Lamming is doing here is indeed a remarkable, daring thing. This is a vision of a manifest image which is pointing towards the unmanifest, hidden, imageless yet wholly authentic sub-structural truth. In the first part of the sky at which G looks, he sees an intense re-dramatization of images in space; but it is an archetype that reflects and succumbs to the horrifying legacies of the past. In that sense it is life-denying, for it has not progressed into any kind of wholeness: the archetype of exploitation is all too evident here as the dialectics of life and death come into conflict under the awesome dictatorial power of the sky. This drama of images simply subscribes succumbs to the kind of exploitation that initiated the society that is the West Indies: there is the initial fragmentation, significantly into islands, beasts and men, and a restatement of the horrifying archetype of slavery. Then G turns and looks at the other part and there is a progression here: a welter of principles involves themselves in a drama that resolves the conflict contained in the first image. The first is the resolution of the dialectics of hunter and hunted—the lion and the lamb springing out of a sacrifice of their prescribed roles. The “sacrificial lamb” now involves itself with the thing that kills: the trusting being of the former gives itself up—self-sacrificing itself, as it were to the traditionally tyrannical lion. The latter, in turn, sacrifices its traditional role as hunter. And, from the resolution of paradox, this enacted image of sacrifice by a sacrifice of image, is created a womb of peace, a realm of relationship that suspends conflict and, in so doing, underlines a profound commitment to life itself.

Yards away, however, there are two men, “exchanging words in an altercation that involved life and death.” It is precisely this discord that renders them less than entirely human. The principles of Black and White wrench themselves apart and consolidate their polarized states as they stand on the ground of conflict. Then, it is as though they suspend their prescribed roles in a moment of truth or recognition of a thing shared, a “common chaos” which neither could understand but both greatly desired to redeem. They lose their eyes—another sacrifice—and in so doing experience insight. The bolstering of ego ceases, the consolidation of polarized states is suspended, and they seem to enact a confirmation of each other's unique personal existence out of a compassionate human response in a shattering moment that was unforeseen, and which may not be repeated or imitated. They suspend traditional, biased concepts of humanity, thereby reasserting a profoundly realistic image of man: “Are you not a brother?” And so, out of their recognition comes a sharpening in outline and tear-like trickles of rain. Fundamental principles, rendered hierarchical and static because of ruthlessly entrenched dehumanising biases, become resolved: land/sea/sky (the “basement” and “precipice” of the sky), hunter/hunted, death/life,

Black/White, animal/human, wholeness/disintegration, victim/victor, all participate in a drama that subscribes to life rather than succumbs to stasis and so death. The relevance of all of this resides in the fact that the images in the sky represent the objectification of a subjective perception. The very tone of the recording, retrospective “I now” of Lamming lends a dialectical balance to the perception of the evolving “I then” which is, in fact, the dramatic agent of a subconscious fictionalised reality. The images represent the exteriorisation of G's oceanic density, dramatizing at once images of despair and hope, the strangling obedience to an exploitative archetype and at the same time an unpredictable, fulfilling historical archetype. The novel ends with Pa about to leave for the Alms House, with the Shoemaker's house being reduced to “a bundle of wood heaped on stones” as he tries to remove it, and with G's journey to Trinidad. All have been rendered homeless, in many senses. Even so, however, there remains a stubborn, persistent core of being, diminished but potent, which is symbolized by the pebble. At the end of the novel, on the edge of his journey to Trinidad, G recalls the words of Pa and a constellation of people and thoughts which reflect his own state:

‘Twas a night like this nine years ago when those waters roll.’
The village, my mother, a boy among boys, a man who his people won't feel alone, to be a different kind of creature. Words and voices falling like a shower and the old man returning with the pebble under the grape leaves on the sand. (303)

To miss the fact that events and people are structurally sandwiched by a reference (made, significantly, by Pa) to the flood, on one hand, and by the permanence symbolized by the pebble on the other, is to be blind to the kind of paradox which surrounds G and which he embodies in the room of his consciousness; the paradox of destruction and homelessness and, at the same time, an incorrigible hope for a fulfilling recreation of reality is one that underlines a very fundamental aspect of West Indian literature. In this passage, the language itself, “words and voices falling like a shower,” is reminiscent of G's bath on the shifting pebbles and the drama of the vision in the sky. The ending of *In the Castle of my Skin*, therefore, represents the contraction of paradoxical symbolic images which interpenetrate each other and become re-interjected into the consciousness of the narrator as he is about to move to Trinidad a place which incidentally, close as it is to Barbados in cultural, geographic and historical terms remains, by and large, outside of any conscious shared experience of the Barbadians in the novel. Implicit in the ending is the fact that G is himself uneasy about finding a sense of self and a home in Trinidad. Even though he is afforded the brief apprehension in the “clouds” scene, G is not yet ready to undertake a sustained imaginative grope backward into the beginnings of the West Indian's unique dilemma, by restating history in order that he may release himself from an imprisoning archetype. As we move away from Castle, we realize that G is not yet ready to undertake this rather more perilous grope towards an apprehension of the pebble, of that oceanic hidden image within him. And so, he enacts the desired response to the warning made by an African ancestor in Pa's dream:

So if you hear some young fool fretting about back to Africa, keep far from the invalid and don't force a passage to where you won't yet belong. (211)

The impact of *In the Castle of my Skin* has been a tremendous one on West Indian literature. As Charles Larson writes:

In a way, it is proper to think of Lamming's work as foreshadowing the later inward turning of the Third World novel—personal history depicted through introspection, stream of consciousness, the interior monologue.¹⁷ Indeed, in *Castle* George Lamming made the first muscular artistic leap in West Indian literature towards an authentic response to this West Indian dilemma of psychic fragmentation and homelessness. In the *Castle of my Skin* points toward the questions but, like the clouds in G's vision in the sky, provides no definite answers.

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