

*Singing Her Own Song:
Women and Selfhood in Zee Edgell's
"Beka Lamb"*

LORNA DOWN

SET WITHIN the framework of a colonial society, a society aspiring to independence, *Beka Lamb* examines the dialectical relationship between that society and the individual. The personal stories of the girls Beka and Toycie are used as ways of examining the colonial society. The relationship between Toycie and Emilio in particular suggests the exploitative colonial one. And Beka's journey to self-assurance compares with her country's move to independence. In addition, the traditional ways are shown in conflict with the values promoted by the Church and educational institutions. The result is dramatic change whose impact, emphasized by the constant references to "befo' time" and "tings bruk down," is seen in the disintegrating society, its former wholeness and stability eroded by the colonial experience. But disintegration is only part of the life cycle. Edgell's heroine learns this truth, and by implication independence is therefore a real possibility for her country.

The more important emphasis, however, is on the highly personal odyssey of Beka from early adolescent dependence and uncertainty to self-definition and integration. The novel begins in the present, revealing Beka's success and achievement. It then moves to the past, recalling the major events of her life in order to explain and give meaning to the present. Edgell appropriately uses a folk ritual — The Wake — to place this journey. The Wake operates on two levels: it is a way of mourning what is gone; it is also an attempt to discover and celebrate what has been gained. So Beka, in having a private Wake for Toycie, is paying her respects to the dead and allowing herself to grieve; but

in recalling Toycie's life, she is also gaining insight into her own life and that of her society. The Wake is essentially a medium through which the events of the past are recounted, sifted for their fine truths, and appropriated. In doing so, Beka is engaged in ordering through memory the fragments of the past, finding its patterns and recreating self. Like Hagar in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, another novel carefully organized around the act of remembering, she comes to a new understanding of self and community. Beka learns truths necessary for her survival as an integrated person. The Wake, as Miss Ivy points out, is "a help to the living" (*Beka Lamb*, 66). Moreover, the Wake is a symbol of past traditions which Edgell shows Beka must retain if she is to have an awareness of her community and her race.

Central to this novel is the close relationship between Beka and Toycie, which not only points up the support that women provide for each other but also reveals the experiences of the adolescent female. Edgell presents both Beka and Toycie as adolescents in the quest for identity. Through them she explores different facets of female adolescent experience—their awakening sexuality, relationships, fantasies and fears. The friendship between Toycie and Beka defines and charts both girls' growth into and beyond their specifically adolescent crises. Toycie also functions as Beka's alter ego. She lives out things that remain mere possibilities for Beka, showing quite clearly how Beka, like so many things in her country, "could bruk down." Toycie and Beka also seem initially to represent a body-mind dichotomy, but Beka is shown as resolving this split as she moves towards unity.

The relationship provides the emotional support both girls need. Toycie at first seems the stronger and more mature of the two. She helps Beka with her studies and seems to pass her examinations with ease. Education seems to open extensive possibilities for her, and the limitations imposed by her poverty do not inhibit her spirit. Beka points out Toycie's ability to give her squalid environment an "enchanted quality":

She was the one who touched each humble item in that yard, embellishing everything with bright sparkles of what she believed could be. (98)

Her longing for another life is suggested only in her choice of Fort George, the residence of the wealthy, as the place for their walks. Otherwise, Toycie seems confident and self-assured. The extent of her assurance becomes evident in her relationship with the other sex, which probes her inner resources and her strengths, testing her ability to cope well with life. In effect, Edgell uses the typical adolescent relationship to show changes in Toycie and to reveal the causes for her "breaking down."

Toycie's relationship with Emilio is basically negative. Emilio regards Toycie as little more than an experiment, a chance to test his manhood. The exploitative relationship renders Toycie the victim; she gives her body to Emilio in exchange for his love, accepting unconsciously the notion that the sexual act is an exploitable and tradeable commodity instead of a caring and meaningful contact between equals. Such an insight, however, is hardly possible for an adolescent like Toycie, who is both innocent and ignorant of the intricacies of the male-female relationship. Her unease in the relationship is clear, but she refuses to admit and examine her feelings. Her response to Emilio is emotional and non-rational. In contrast, Beka views him with rational distrust, forcing Toycie to examine important aspects of her relationship with Emilio:

'You think Milio will marry you when you graduate, Toycie?'
 'He said so,' Toycie replied. . . .
 'Panias scarcely ever marry creole like we, Toycie' (46-47)

Beka implies that the relationship is basically exploitative since the respect and care for each other symbolized by marriage are not likely to be a part of it. But Toycie shuts out these thoughts even though her action — "standing up and wrapping the towel into a skirt around her waist" — suggests an awareness of her vulnerability. She refuses to consider Beka's argument and blocks it out by humming the calypso: "It's nobody's business but my own" (47). Ironically, Toycie's failure to examine her relationship with Emilio causes her "business," what is essentially a private act, to become that of the community and her school, for both groups have to deal with her resultant pregnancy.

Moreover, Toycie's apprehension about the relationship indicates that she, unlike Emilio, is not ready for sexual involvement. Yet her answer to Beka's strong warning not to go with Emilio is emphatic: "I must go, Beka'" (48). She is responding out of longing for love, an act that reiterates Edgell's insight that women often exchange sex for love. Significantly, there are images of destruction, of vulnerability that prefigure Toycie's submitting to Emilio: "At the bottom, a conch sucked into the sand, while another was on its back exposing the deep pink pearliness of its shell. . . . Near [Beka] . . . were tiny silver sprats cut into pieces of bait . . ." (48). These details point to Toycie's physical and emotional nakedness. Ironically, Toycie alerts Beka to the man-of-war she nearly stepped on, knowing that avoidance is the way to deal with the poisonous creature, but she fails to avoid "Manfish Milio" (50). Instead she runs towards him and the result is her death.

The association of death with sex is a standard literary convention. In the work of D. H. Lawrence, the connection is positive: sex and death are both part of a primal darkness for which the spirit hungers. In *Beka Lamb*, the connection is negative. Toycie's liaison with Emilio occurs in the cemetery, an association with death further reinforced by news of Granny Straker's death. And the act itself debases Toycie: "Toycie looked shamefaced . . ."; "He helped Toycie through the broken fence and she said, not looking at him . . ." (59). The result is the "death" of Toycie. She loses her innocence but, more important, she loses her identity and dignity. Her humiliation comes from an unconscious awareness of Emilio's exploitative separation of her body from her "person."

The impact of this relationship on Toycie is decisive, since Emilio provides her only substantial personal relationship with a male. The absence of a relationship with a father or a substitute is marked. Unlike Tantie in Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey* (6), whose relationships with "Uncles" provide Tee with models of male-female unions as well as father figures, Miss Eila is too insecure to have such relationships. There is for Toycie, no Mikey, the big brother-father figure for Tee. This absence in Toycie's life is painfully emphasized by Beka's strong tie with her father.

Toycie is also acting out of her natural adolescent interest in the opposite sex without the modifying influence that contact with a male relative would have provided. For all these reasons, Toycie is highly vulnerable to Emilio. Emilio's rejection of her is therefore particularly damaging, for it reinforces her perception of being abandoned and unwanted by recalling her father's rejection of her. This triple loss — of father, mother, and Emilio — undermines Toycie's sense of self; not even past successes at school can restore her feelings of self-worth.

The school and church systems also contribute to Toycie's "breaking down," since the values and attitudes of the school authorities oppose those of the community. The community can accept Toycie's pregnancy as a natural event even though they know the difficulties of the situation. Toycie herself hopes to salvage something of her dreams by concentrating on her studies: the school becomes an avenue of possible escape. But this hope is shattered when Sister Virgil remains adamant about expelling her. Sister Virgil, head of a Christian institution, has no sympathy for Toycie. She is concerned only about the reputation of her school as she mouths easy sentiments about the need for women to remain "modest."

Bill Lamb, the male outsider, states the view of those in the community. He is open about the matter, refusing to see it as "delicate" or shocking. He recognizes the discrimination against the female: she is expelled while the male is allowed to remain in school. Bill Lamb also tries to make Sister Virgil see beyond the typical picture of the pregnant teenager by forcing her to look at the context of Toycie's life. He refers to Toycie's and Miss Eila's poverty:

'... Miss Eila here, has worked from morning to late night for Toycie's education, making bread and buns for sale, after cooking all day in other people's houses. . . . [S]he had one ambition, to see Toycie graduate. . . .' (120)

Sister Virgil's act marks her distancing and negation of Toycie's reality in direct contrast to the community's recognition and acceptance of it. Toycie's final hope is broken against Sister Virgil's obduracy. Abandoned by another woman, Toycie disintegrates. Beka's support, her expressed love for Toycie and

willingness to help her bring up the child, cannot lessen Toycie's feeling of total abandonment.

Toycie's story reflects a major problem of adolescents — the conflicts they experience in dealing with their sexuality. Such conflicts are heightened because of society's expectations of the female adolescent. Toycie's failure is the result of her inability to reconcile need for love with the expectations of her society in a balanced, rational and emotionally satisfying manner. Toycie passively allows herself to be manipulated and perhaps, as Germaine Greer asserts in *The Female Eunuch*, such an action is the result of a society that insists on girls assuming a "feminine posture of passivity and sexlessness" (8). This feminine passivity where sex is concerned is also obvious in the older women in Toycie's community. They remain "blind" to her absences and her growing infatuation with Emilio. The only instance of adult interference early on in the relationship comes ironically, from the boy's mother. The other women, including the politically active and sensitive Miss Ivy, passively look on without helping Toycie to work through the conflicts which follow the onset of puberty.

Edgell uses Toycie's story as the framework for examining Beka's development. Unlike Toycie, Beka is initially unable to meet the demands of school. When she fails, and obviously fails, Beka insists on fantasizing about her failure. She is aware of this weakness, yet her confrontation with it reveals a marked difference between her way of managing and Toycie's. Toycie relies exclusively on her feelings to resolve issues. Beka not only admits and expresses her feelings but also tries to examine the reasons for her behaviour. Her fantasizing thus serves to chart her development. Beka's fantasy world functions on two levels. On one level, it expresses the adolescent's way of articulating her dreams and desires. It is on this level that Beka's fantasies on the seaside operate; they encompass the hopes of teenagers, whose reality denies them certain possibilities. On another level, Beka's fantasy is directly related to her society and its expectations of her. For Beka and others in her class, education provides the means for the achievement of her goals. The reality of her world though is of things breaking down, not succeeding. Fantasy pro-

vides a bridge between what is real and what is hoped for and expected of her.

Beka wants success and the fulfilment of her dreams. She does not want "to turn out like Miss Flo's granddaughter" (77) with three children with three different fathers — a real possibility for the young female without education or work. Miss Flo's reference to this possibility frightens her:

'No more school, eh Beka? . . . Well, take some advice and watch these young boys and married men around here now.' (74)

Beka suddenly becomes "conscious of her knees sticking way out below her dress and tightness of her blouse" (74-75). The adolescent's awareness of her body and her sexuality marks a new stage in her development; Beka is forced to recognize and acknowledge her vulnerability.

Beka's fear of failure and of her sexuality controlling her is mitigated by her strong adult support system. Unlike Toycie, she has positive role models in Miss Ivy and Granny Straker who, like her mother, provide for her emotional nurturing. She also has an emotionally satisfying relationship with her father, whose rational and realistic approach to life, tempered by a certain sensitivity, insists on Beka finding a balance between her emotional and rational aspects of self.

Lilla, Beka's mother, is the conventional aspiring middle-class woman. She is, however, more individualized than Beatrice in *Crick Crack, Monkey* (10); this is evident in her relationship with her daughter. Lilla, in addition, has a higher degree of self-awareness than Beatrice. Her preferences — whether for roses in her garden or for the rejection of certain traditional customs such as the Wake — are examined, and when her reasons for holding them prove no longer valid she can let go of them. Her relationship with her husband, though not elaborated on, is shown to be more substantial than Beatrice's marriage. She unconsciously shows Beka the possibility for a warm, caring and trusting relationship between a man and a woman. More importantly, she helps Beka to separate her fantasy from her reality. To do this, Lilla recounts her past, sharing with Beka her feelings of isolation and inferiority at school. The narrative opens for Beka the pri-

vate inner world of her mother and so strengthens their bonding. The revelation also affirms that feelings of vulnerability are not peculiar to Beka, and that they can be surmounted. The past has shown her mother "breaking down"; the present reveals that the process has halted, and so gives an assurance that not all things have to break down. Similarly, Lilla's present of an exercise book and pen for Beka functions as a "tool" for survival. Lilla tells her:

'Well, everytime you feel like telling a lie, I want you to write it down in there and pretend you are writing a story. That way, you can tell the truth and save the lie for this notebook. And when we tell you stories about before time, you can write them down in there too. . . .' (71)

The exercise book suggests the use made of diaries by females — their means of exploring their private world, so often in conflict with the public one. The diary becomes the counterpart of Woolf's "room of one's own" and functions almost as effectively in helping the woman to reconstruct self as she tries to integrate her public/private selves.

Beka's "tools" of survival are distinctly feminine. One recalls the use she made of cleaning the attic; cleaning becomes one of her ways of releasing her frustration and anger. Then, there is her diary (the exercise book) a means of exploring that private world of dreams and hopes and of connecting it with the outer reality. Finally, the growing of flowers is a means of encapsulating and duplicating the life cycle — birth, death, birth.

It is within this context of survival that Great Gran Straker and Miss Ivy function as role models for Beka. They both represent female survivors and are therefore important figures in Beka's life. Great Gran Straker, Miss Ivy and Lilla also represent three generations of women, a strongly bonded community depicting the continuity between the past and the present. Great Gran Straker reinforces the importance of the past. She is "'one of the last . . . of the old people that remember things from the time before'" (62). Like Toycie and Beka, Miss Ivy seems to be in some areas an extension of Gran Straker, since qualities suggested in the description of her are developed in detail in Miss Ivy. Together they help to "root" Beka by giving her a sense of tradition and of her culture. Beka is made aware of being a part of a

larger whole and of having a place within her society. Beka needs this awareness as she faces a school that makes little of her traditions and culture, with the possible effect of making her feel isolated and displaced. This perception of life's continuities and the relation of all things to one another is reflected in Great Gran Straker's attitude to the natural world. She tells Beka: "You are the earth, and the earth is you . . ." (63). It is this realization of the unity of all things which guides Beka to wholeness. Beka also comes to understand through Great Gran Straker that one is responsible for directing one's life and for controlling one's emotions. She has told Beka when she expressed a fear of sleeping alone that

no matter how many people there are around, nobody could sleep for another, and so she had better learn to deal with the loneliness of bedtime. (27)

It is significant then that the women at the Wake recognize Beka's inheritance of Great Gran Straker's spirit. This recognition prefigures Beka's taking her place as one of the survivors.

Miss Ivy is another positive role model for Beka. She too had been caught by "Toycie's first trouble" but had developed into an integrated and confident woman despite this. Beka needs this concrete illustration of a woman who overcomes the vulnerability inherent in the relationship between men and women. And even though Beka insists that she will never fall in love, never have Toycie's pain, she is reassured by Miss Ivy's experience and survival of that heartache.

It is also important for Beka to realize that one can attempt to prevent the fragmentation of not only one's person but one's society. Thus Ivy's knowledge and talk of the disintegrating nature of her society is balanced by an active interest and involvement in politics. This interest is reflected in Beka's role playing of politicians and her interest in political discussions is symbolized by her changing the place of manufacture on Toycie's guitar from Spain to Belize.

Miss Ivy is also quick to point out to Beka the changes that are taking place in their society. One of her favourite phrases is "befo' time," as she informs Beka of all the opportunities that

would formerly have been closed to her. Yet there is also an ambiguous ring to Miss Ivy's "befo' time." She suggests that at Beka's age she knew more about house work than Beka does. So when she feels herself losing Beka to the world of school, she belittles her effort to win the essay contest:

'You are wasting precious time trying to win that fool-fool contest. What I am telling you is important, but you are becoming Miss Biggety, and Miss High Mind, and I am weary telling you over and over again a pania, bakra or expatriate will win!' (151)

Miss Ivy's reaction is that of the adult to the adolescent's assertion of self. Beka is no longer the dependent child, "surrounded . . . tightly" by her family "like sepals around a bud" (27). She has learned that she is responsible for her future; she chooses whether or not she goes the way of Flo's grand-daughter or Toycie or finds a way through education to fulfil her dreams. What Miss Ivy fails to understand is that Beka's dedication to her studies is her way of armouring herself against fragmentation — not only in the sense that it provides a way to success, but because writing is her way of releasing her grief at the loss of Toycie.

Beka acknowledges the importance of Miss Ivy: "Granny Ivy is important to me, too" (152). Like Great Gran Straker she teaches Beka the value of their past and their traditions, making her aware that an understanding of the present often requires a knowledge of the past. Miss Ivy's involvement in her community also helps Beka to forge ties with others beyond their immediate family. The community functions like an extended family — critical, observant of her ways, but also supportive. Miss Flo's disturbing "no more school, eh Beka?" (74) is balanced by Mr. Gordillo's concern: "'I offered a special mass at the Cathedral, Beka, and every night for one week, the beads'" (39). This experience of community helps to strengthen Beka's feeling of belonging.

In spite of this, Beka has to learn that "nobody [can] sleep for another" (27). She has to direct her own life and manage the crises in her life; it is in learning to do this that Beka discovers

self. The tidal motif, "the constant tension between the drawing back of the water, and the violence of it crashing against the shore" effectively mirrors Beka's confusion and her alternating moments of superficial calm and stress. These are also echoed in Beka's question to Toycie on one of their walks, "'Suppose I fall down?'" Ironically, it is Toycie who tells her, "'You'll never reach Battlefield Park if you're so *fraid*.'" But Beka's decision then to leave "the safe front porch of the rectangular swimming crawl . . . to teeter cautiously along one of its narrow wooden ledges" (44) characterizes her approach: she tries even when her progress is slow and tentative.

The loss of Toycie, however, makes immediate Beka's fear of collapse. For Beka, Toycie becomes not so much a cautionary figure as a vivid example of what can happen to her. The increase of this fear is symbolically expressed by the hurricane. Just as the hurricane destroys the area, so is Beka almost destroyed by the increasing inner turmoil and confusion which finally explode into hysteria at the news of Toycie's death. Significantly, Beka's hysteria is broken by news of the budding bougainvillea plant. Signalling life and hope, it "saves" Beka as it forces her to remember the relation of all things to one another, the connection between loss and growth, life and death, things breaking down and things being built up.

Beka's Wake for Toycie is essential then, for it is also a Wake for Beka, who has experienced a kind of breakdown but has survived. Her remembering of Toycie functions on different levels. On one level, it helps her to acknowledge her sorrow and to grieve. Thus the Wake, like all mourning ceremonies, is cathartic. Equally important, it helps her to re-member Toycie in the way Wilson Harris speaks of "re-memberment," of creating from fragments (15). In doing so, Beka re-creates self and affirms her identity. Moreover, her possession of the knowledge that life is both loss and growth, that loss is not permanent, and that one does not have to "break down and die" arms her for life. She can therefore reply to Miss Ivy's question:

'Afraid to go up by yourself?
'I'm not really afraid.' (171)

In *Beka Lamb*, Edgell portrays the importance of adolescent girls' private relationships. And while she admits to the tension that society creates she demonstrates that finally it is the girls' personalities and their means of resolving conflicts that determine their growth. The mother-daughter relationship in its various forms also provides central support for the adolescent. There is a direct relation between its presence and the adolescent's definition of self. In addition, Edgell examines stereotypical female means of coping — emotional and passive. Such ways are shown as negative: heroines who practice them fail to attain wholeness. In contrast, there are strong and independent women who through an active creativity impose their will on their world. Edgell has affirmed emotionality and passivity are not the only feminine ways of coping.

Beka Lamb offers us a more complex picture of the female adolescent. Through Toychie and Beka, Edgell examines the conflicts she faces with her awakening sexuality and society's increasing expectations. Such expectations are often ambiguous. They acknowledge her visible growth and supposed maturity but not her sexuality. Beka and Toychie are thus most vulnerable in that area. Miss Flo makes oblique references to Beka's sexuality and Miss Ivy's confession helps her. But generally, the adult women remain silent about their daughters' sexuality. And while Edgell does not claim that biology controls a girl's perception of self and the choices she makes (that is, that biology is destiny), she does take into account the pressure society exerts on a woman to conform to its image of femininity, especially during adolescence. Like other women, Beka must confront and surmount these pressures to achieve selfhood.

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