

George Lamming's
"In The Castle Of My Skin":
A Modern West Indian Novel

VINEY KIRPAL

DOUBT ABOUT THE merit and stature of postcolonial literary texts—rather than their paucity—is the factor that most likely discourages many Departments of English in India and elsewhere from formally introducing them into their syllabi. To change this situation, critics have to direct and show readers how to read and appraise these works so that they develop the necessary confidence in their literary and cultural value. In the absence of suitable critical guidelines, these Departments of English Literature seem content to preserve the status quo (that is, the study of British literature). Perhaps, they consider it safer to continue with English literature texts whose worth is well established. On the literary critical front, although many contemporary critics have written on postcolonial texts, few have been able to break out of the Eurocentric mould (perhaps unintentionally) thus contributing further to the confusion. I shall illustrate my point by responding to Neil ten Kortenaar's article "George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*: Finding Promise in the Land," published in *ARIEL*, in 1991.

George Lamming's first novel, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), winner of several literary awards, is considered by many to be a major novel.¹ Although Kortenaar acknowledges that the novel has a "special place in the hearts" of West Indian readers, he sees it as a "flawed" narrative, as a "formless" work, which "reveals the travail that gave birth to something new" (43). He proceeds to say that this novel takes on a formlessness when the novelist is depicting the undeveloped ego or self of the West Indian village community. He allows that towards the end, when Trumper returns from the US with a better sense of the

world and a clearly defined self-identity, the novel achieves some control over the structure. Ignoring the protagonist G.'s rejection of Trumper's propagation of a Negro identity as romantic, Kortenaar concludes:

By giving Trumper the final word, the novel implicitly agrees with Trumper's vision. The novel's close validates a point of view that condemns most of the text itself. . . . The novel stands self-condemned of sterility and paralysis, but in the end it affirms that the West Indies stands ready to make its own narrative. (53)

For Kortenaar, it is enough that there is a "hero" to write about, a narrative to engage in at last, because Trumper fulfills the usual fictional expectation of a journey from innocence to experience. Reading Kortenaar's Eurocentric analysis, few would feel inspired to include Lamming's seminal text in their syllabi. I wish therefore to examine his major arguments in detail, to indicate his misreadings and questionable critical pronouncements, and to set right the record about the status of *In the Castle of My Skin* as a major work of modern West Indian fiction. It is necessary to do so because of the adverse and pervasive influence the article could have, considering the fact that it is published in *ARIEL*, a reputable and widely read journal.

Kortenaar makes three points. First, he argues that *In the Castle of My Skin* has an "ungainly style" and "erratic narrative" (43). The novel is raw in "feel" and "abjures all narrative hooks, all novelistic techniques that arouse the reader's interest in what happens next" (44). It has, Kortenaar claims, no climax, no emotional catharsis. The flood with which the novel opens could have constituted its climax (as do floods in *The Mill on the Floss* and in *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, in which they suggest death and rebirth, and baptism and regeneration). Instead, it appears at the beginning of the book where there are no expectations to be fulfilled as yet.

The other scene, Kortenaar observes, that could have been explored for its climactic value is that of the violent riot in Creighton's Village. Unable to understand the meaning of this incident using English fictional norms, Kortenaar dismisses it as insignificant and amusing:

The violence is reported to be coming to Creighton's Village; the villagers take refuge behind their barred doors; they come out

by a pictorial style which recalls and sometimes overtly quotes nineteenth-century Australian impressionist painting. For example, Desmond Digby's illustrations for Paterson's *Waltzing Matilda* (1970) use a painterly technique and dark palette strongly reminiscent of McCubbin's work—several commentators describe this picture book as a “landmark” in Australian picture book publishing,² a comment which indicates the extent to which such stylistic choices and the ideologies which inform them are privileged and canonized. Roberts's “Shearing the Rams” (1890) has also become a canonical pretext for a number of picture book versions of ballads, for example, two versions of *Click go the Shears* by Walter Cunningham (1976) and Robert Ingpen (1984) and John Anthony King's “The Shearing Shed” (in Henry Lawson's *Mary called him Mister*, 1991). The occurrence of the same image in Kan Hannam's *Sunday Too Far Away*, a film made in 1975, and a 1995 television advertisement for a medical benefits fund, suggests that this is an aspect of the wider cultural production of texts and ideologies. More recently, King has produced naturalistic and heavily romanticized versions of bush ballads which are stylistically indebted to the naive realist conventions of early colonialist painting. Most of these picture book versions of ballads and verse evince an unreflective nostalgia for a rural colonial past, which, combined with elements of a romanticized tradition of resistance to authority implicit in the figure of the swagman and the “wild colonial boy” (for example, King's *The Wild Colonial Boy* 1985), is displaced through the historical setting.

Analyzing the construction of national identities in picture books is not simply a matter of looking for Australian cultural icons, like the Harbour Bridge, kangaroos, and vegemite sandwiches. Such icons obviously do play an important role as markers of “Australianness,” especially for overseas consumption, and can evoke a paradigm which particular texts engage with and interrogate. As Turner has suggested, “the cultural specificity, the Australian-ness, of Australian texts” lies in “recurring principles of organisation and selection” (*National Fictions* 19). Texts draw upon a bank of myths, symbols, connotations, and ideologies that have currency in the Australian culture.

better organized text can be traced to allegiance to the norms of English fiction.

It is such Eurocentric criticism (or criticism from a non-indigenous perspective) that prompted me to write the article "What is the Modern Third World Novel?" in an attempt to modify the Third World literature critical scene:

[Third-World] novels are plotless in the Western critical sense, that is, they lack formal logic. They are loosely structured, circular, reverberative, and they do not follow the usual pattern of development and action in the Western novel. . . . The Third-World novel with its unstructured, meandering, unbound, episodic quality suggests the absence of sequentiality, very much in the manner of traditional narratives. . . . The Third-World novel is not constructed without a sophisticated knowledge of structuring fiction. The difference is that its structuring principle is borrowed from the indigenous narrative forms, and it is the native world view that it aspires to picture and image with genuineness. (150)

This is true of *In the Castle of My Skin*. It is my proposition that unless its constructive principle is located in the oral art of storytelling (although Lamming is writing a novel and not an oral tale), the novel will always be evaluated as a blemished manifestation of the English novel. For taken as a novel, Lamming's text has autonomy of space and time, but taken as oral narrative it erases causal and spatial relationships. It seeks to grow in meaning through juxtaposition of episodes and through accretion rather than through attainment of a climax (as in English fiction). To look at *In The Castle of My Skin* from this point of view is to have an altogether fresh and positive perspective of the novel's structure and characterization.²

To begin with, the book does not flow sequentially towards some grand climax. The flood, with which the novel opens, signifies not death or rebirth but the hopelessly static conditions of the deprived, penurious Barbadian, particularly the woman (often a single parent), under colonization: "As if in serious imitation of the waters that raced outside, our lives—meaning our fears and their corresponding ideals seemed to escape down an imaginary drain that was our future" (10). Yet the scene is not imbued with existentialist despair. As the relentless rain floods home and hearth, G.'s mother breaks into a folksong that is

Dozer tears up the mulga and the wattle (native Australian species); in the 1987 edition, Dozer tears up the prickly pear and bracken (imported noxious weeds). These are overt reflections of changing environmental policies and attitudes.

More implicit ideological shifts are revealed by the pictorial styles of the two editions of *Dan McDougall and the Bulldozer* in the representation of the landscape, the architecture, and the characters. The pictorial style of the 1960s editions uses flat colour and simple line drawing. There is little attempt to suggest an illusionistic space and the figures are given a cartoon-like treatment. *Dan McDougall and the Bulldozer* (1963) also depicts some fairly obvious iconic markers of Australianness (kangaroos, koalas, and aborigines) in an otherwise non-specific landscape. The three Aboriginal figures who greet Dan and Dozer on their return to the bush are not mentioned in the text. In the picture, they receive stereotypical representation (naked and carrying spears), and they appear as a part of the landscape. (In the 1987 edition they are replaced by three dairy cows—a curious effect, whereby politically incorrect illustration is removed, but which then reminds us how Aborigines are effaced from such texts). These iconic features connote an image of “Australia” as a generalized concept—lacking in particularity. The pictorial style of the 1987 edition is more naturalistic. The illustrator uses naturalistic perspective, animals and plants appear in detail, and there is a wide range of types of plants, animals, and birds. The “Australian” features are a more integral part of the pictorial design and are more particularized. I am not suggesting that the pictorial style of the 1987 edition of *Dan McDougall and the Bulldozer* is doing anything new, nor that the 1963 edition is all that outdated in its style. The tokenism of the 1963 text is of course still prevalent in contemporary picture books—for example vegemite sandwiches, pavlova, and lamingtons in *Possum Magic* (1989). And naturalism was also used in earlier texts—stylistically, the 1987 edition of *Dan McDougall* is similar to *Shy the Platypus* (1945). However, the pictorial styles used in these re-editions of Pender’s work do show how naturalism has become a dominant and privileged mode for representing the country or bush landscape and for representing the past. By contrast, where

Since Kortenaar's main model is the English novel, it is not surprising that he is also dissatisfied with characterization in *In the Castle of My Skin*. He points out that Lamming does not give centrality to any one character. Though G. is present in the first two chapters, he disappears from the text for the next hundred pages or so. Kortenaar wonders where G. is during the school scenes or why in the beach scene he never utters a single word, the conversation being confined to Boy Blue, Bob, and Trumper. Besides, he is puzzled why the novel has such a host of characters with such labels as First Boy, Second Boy, Third, Fourth Boys as if they were secondary characters in a play (45). He notes also that there is a Mr. Foster, a Trumper, and a Boy Blue, characters "whose names are merely names, with no deeper significance" (51). This, he concludes, is typical of a village community with an undeveloped self; the characters in the organic community have no identity—"Three, thirteen, thirty. *It does not matter*" (24). Surprisingly, Kortenaar quotes from a section in the novel where Lamming is deliberately emphasizing village custom. Equally surprisingly, Kortenaar leaves out an earlier, more substantial reference, in which, Lamming, using similar statistics, represents the village community as an ever-growing, vital, creative, life-generating, and life-sustaining force:

In the broad savannah where the grass lowcropped sang in the singeing heat the pattern had widened. Not three, nor thirteen, but thirty. Perhaps three hundred. Men. Women. Children. The men at cricket. The children at hide and seek. The women laying out their starched clothes to dry. *The sun let its light flow down on them as life let itself flow through them.* Three. Thirteen. Thirty. Three hundred.
(25; emphasis added)

Ideological selection or genuine choice, the meaning that Kortenaar has given to the scene is very different from the one offered by Lamming.

Once again, if we wish to understand the characterization in the novel, we may have to turn to the principles of oral narrative on which much of Third-World fiction is modelled:

Are there other features too that distinguish the Third-World novel from the Western? For example, is characterization in the Third-World novel more "illustrational" and archetypal than "representational"? Is there no character development or character intro-

pection as in the Western novel? Are the characters ideals, types, "essentials" more than "individuals," as in traditional narratives?

(Kirpal 152)

Opposing the use of universalist criteria of Western literary criticism for reading Third-World fiction, Arun Mukherjee makes a related point about characterization. She uses Indian novels as an example: "All these novels are crowded with characters who may be considered extraneous if one went by the conventions of a main plot and central characters" (15).

Such a view of characterization enables us to understand characterization in *In the Castle of My Skin*. There is no central consciousness in the novel (as in a Jamesian novel) through whom the events of the book have been refracted. Yet, all its characters (including the unnamed shoemaker who is always referred to as *the* shoemaker and not as *a* shoemaker) acquire a presence and centrality that Lamming in writing this novel aspired to give to the West Indian community. In *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), Lamming declares his autonomy from English literary criteria. We, as critics, ought to heed his fictional policy statement:

What the West Indian writer has done has nothing to do with the English critic's assessments. The West Indian writer is the first to add a new dimension to writing about the West Indian community. (37)

The independence of Third-World writers such as Lamming demonstrates and advocates here is to be respected if we are not to fall into the same trap that ensnares Kortenaar: he wishes to praise the book but is uncomfortable doing so because he finds the book "flawed" according to his criteria. So he does the next best thing: he praises it by rationalizing the "flaws" as theme-determined technical necessities. This unfortunately has been the tenor of most available criticism on Third-World/post-colonial fiction.

Kortenaar's third point makes this still clearer. He states that *In the Castle of My Skin* is repetitious not in the way postmodern novels are (in postmodern novels, it appears, repetition is a virtue) but in a way that "drains everything of meaning" (50). Postmodernists subvert narrative sequence in a way that draws total attention to the words and offers double readings.

But according to Kortenaar, in Lamming's novel this does not happen:

Lamming's text is repetitious. He can never say anything once, but must repeat it a dozen times in words that vary only slightly. But this is not the repetition . . . [that] allows that text to acquire a surfeit of meaning. (50)

Repetition in Lamming's novel only leads to "black holes that absorb meaning" and point to a colonial society that "lacks imaginative wholeness" (52). The entire assessment smacks of unpardonable superciliousness. Injustice is done both to the writer and to the community Lamming was seeking to honour. When such literary criteria begin to reduce the worth of a work so mindlessly, it is time to look around for alternative criteria.

The novel's repetitiousness derives not from postmodern novels but from oral tales—though Lamming is not writing a "traditional" narrative. The repetition does not siphon away meaning, as Kortenaar alleges, but rather amplifies meaning. Repetition, a common feature of orature, if employed in writing could become monotonous but repetition can also lead to clarity by underlining and reinforcing what is repeated (Winters 62). In providing many details where one would suffice, the text defines and explicates more fully. For example, the ten scenes of Chapter 2 are in ten different ways of reinforcing the value and meaning of the rich, cohesive community in which G. and his friends grew up. By the end of the chapter, the West Indian village community becomes a vivid, multi-layered, vibrant conceit in our minds.

Since Lamming employs a number of digressions in his novel (the story of Jon, Susie, and Jen, and that of Bots, Bambi, Bambina are two obvious examples), he often repeats sentences to pull the narrative back into control. For instance, Boy Blue tells the story of Jon, Susie, and Jen in three parts. Part 1 is recounted in pages 122-25; this is followed by a discussion of the island folks' attitude towards black skin colour. Part 2 resumes on page 128 with Boy Blue remarking: "I was thinkin' 'bout the story. . . . I think they should put Jon where you say they put those people you mention" (128). The story restarts only to be interrupted again by a fascinating and detailed account of the colour

of crabs' eyes and bodies (128-29) that has nothing to do with the story. Part 3 begins with this dialogue:

"You don't like crab?" Trumper asked, nudging Boy Blue in the ribs.

"I like crabs all right," Boy Blue said, "but *I wus thinkin' 'bout Jon*. Why he choose the cemetery of all places?" (129; emphasis added)

The story of Jon, Susie, and Jen—which concludes in Part 3—is broken into parts and told in installments of uneven length as in an oral narrative. It is interspersed with digressions that are distinct from the digressions in a modern novel. Each return after the digressions carries the story forward but not in a linear manner—unlike the digression in the opening chapter of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo. . . .

His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.

He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon platt. (7)

The digression here is brief and purposeful. It denotes Stephen Dedalus's pre-speech level recall. It suggests remembered associations registered by the individual mind of that lost, forever period, namely childhood. It conveys the nostalgia and total self-absorption typical of children recalling their own infancy. An easily identifiable narrative marker—"His father told him that story"—consciously explains the presence of the digression. The structure of the opening of Joyce's novel runs in a somewhat "linear," cause-effect manner, thus: the story; then Father told Stephen that story; then Stephen was baby Tuckoo, etc. This kind of coherence and clarity is not evident in *In the Castle of My Skin*, as is seen in the structural components of the section under discussion: the narration of the story of Jon, Susie, and Jen; the description of the sea; the description of the landscape; the portrait of Boy Blue; the portrait of Trumper; the discussion of black skin colour; the resumption of the story of Jon, Susie, and Jen; the description of crabs' eyes and bodies; the resumption and completion of the story of Jon, Susie, and Jen. No explanations are

offered for the various digressions. Cumulatively, however, they construct the acute tragedy of a deeply colonized people, who despise not only their own traditions but even their skin colour. This development of the novel through accretion of independent motifs, originates in the structure of oral narrative.

Further, the technique of breaking up the story (the Jon-Susie-Jen story is a story within a story) is not only akin to the method of oral narration but also to the method of repetition that is used to gain control over the narrative. Both Parts 2 and 3 of the story, after two lengthy digressions (about skin colour and crabs) are reined in, using almost identical sentences: "I was thinkin' 'bout Jon." This manner of repetition, as explained by Isidore Okpewho, is the method of the "ring composition." "Ring composition," not only helps the narrator to inflate and expand in order to clarify and reinforce but it also controls a meandering narrative when required.

However, this is not the repetition of postmodern novels where a critique of the text is self-consciously embedded in the text itself, leading to double readings. Such novels, as Kortenaar has rightly observed, "subvert a sequence and with it causality and connection, they draw attention away from story, character, and theme, focussing it on the words themselves" (50). In Lamming's text, the repetition, instead of subverting, develops the story, expands the theme, and weaves the characters at the leisurely pace of an epic. The focus is not on the words but on community life under the stress of changes from within and without. In his novel, repetition amplifies meaning. Thus, the repetition that Kortenaar, evaluating the novel from a postmodern critical perspective, sees as "drain[ing] everything of all meaning," can be seen from another critical perspective—that of orature—to actually extend and add layer upon layer of significance to the text.

In the Castle of My Skin is not a flawed novel, as Kortenaar contends but one constructed according to the principles of oral storytelling. At the same time, George Lamming is writing a modern and complex novel, with complete awareness of the techniques of the modern English novel. He has used the Joycean one-day narrative technique most conspicuously in

Chapter 13, where the action is divided by time into Morning, Noon, and Evening. But he does this by not employing the stream-of-consciousness technique, possibly because he does not perceive his characters as the sophisticated intellectuals and isolates of modern English fiction. Indeed, the assimilation of oral and written narrative structures renders Lamming's novels stylistically one of the best modern texts. It ought to be judged not Eurocentrically but on its own terms as a work straddling different "literary" traditions while remaining firmly rooted in the indigenous.⁴

NOTES

- ¹ In the title of this article, I have described *In the Castle of My Skin* as "A Modern West Indian Novel." I have done so to distinguish it from the modern Euro-American novel and also to emphasize the fact that it is a technically sophisticated novel.
- ² Most Third World novelists have acknowledged their indebtedness to orality as having consciously or unconsciously influenced their technique and their writings. Many claimed to have fused the conventions of oral narratives with the norms of English fiction to create a new form that is a mixture of the scribal and the oral. While orality as a general category cannot and should not cover every stylistic feature of all Third World texts, it is broad enough to take care of many of the features that these texts seem to have in common. This is because orality encompasses not only narratological skills and structures but also the philosophy, values, cultural texts and practices, religious texts and practices, attitude to time, etc. Speaking in very general terms, there is much in common among the Third World countries with respect to these parameters than with the Western world. Third World discourse is also governed by polymorphism as against classes of successively subordinate grades in Western discourse (cf. Cairns). It can carry together fairly complex gradations on the same platform. Thus it is possible for orality as a critical category to explain both "strong" characters such as Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the panoply of undistinguishable characters such as G. and his friends in *In The Castle of My Skin*. However, this is not to overlook the fact that orality also differs in specific details from one Third World country to another, and they have their own impact on the novel forms emerging from different Third World countries.
- ³ The comparison with a collage is merely illustrative since even a collage has a distinct underlying organicity that is absent in an oral narrative.
- ⁴ This article is a modified version of a paper I presented at the IACLALS Conference, Mysore, 27-29 January 1995.

WORKS CITED

- Cairns, P. "Style, Structure and the Status of Language In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*." *WLWE* 5:1 (1985): 1-9.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. 1916. London: Jonathan Cape, 1975.

- Kirpal, Viney. "What is the Modern Third World Novel?" *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23:1 (1988): 144-56.
- Kortenaar, Neil ten. "George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*: Finding Promise in the Land." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 22:2 (1991): 43-53.
- Lamming, George. *In the Castle of My Skin*. 1953. London: Longman, 1970.
- . "In Conversation with Frank Birbalsingh." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23:1 (1988): 182-88.
- . *The Pleasures of Exile*. 1960. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992.
- Mukherjee, Arun. *Towards an Aesthetic of Opposition: Essays on Literature Criticism and Cultural Imperialism*. Toronto: Williams-Wallace, 1988.
- Mukarovskiy, Jan. *The Word and Verbal Art*. Trans. John Burbank and Peter Steiner. New Haven: Yale UP, 1977.
- Okpewho, Isidore. *The Epic in Africa: Towards a Poetics of the Oral Performance*. 1975. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.
- Winters, Marjorie. "An Objective Approach to Achebe's Style." *RAL* 12:1 (1988): 56-66.