

MARXISM IN GEORGE LAMMING'S IN THE CASTLE OF MY SKIN

Reginald Facah, Ph.D.
English and Literary Studies Department
Tansian University Umunya, Anambra State, Nigeria
08037881001. regfach@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper aims to attempt a critical reading of George Lamming's first novel In the Castle of My Skin within the purview of the Marxist and post-colonial literary theories. Essentially, it shall examine socio-economic issues in the novel like: economic exploitation and/or marginalization colonialism, land ownership as well as issues of socio-political injustices and land deprivation and exploitation shall be explored in the light of Marxist and post-colonial readings. The abject lack of culture and traditional customs and value systems, as well as the social pressures brought on the people with the coming of the white men shall also be explored in the paper. Our conclusion which shall be drawn from our explorations will reveal the nexus between the comings of the Whiteman to the West Indian island nation of Barbados, the reactions of their people in the light of their historical antecedent and the concomitant effect on them. This work shall be one of the few tying this novel to a Marxist/Postcolonial reading and would thus be a good contribution to scholarship along this line of study.

Introduction

Over the years, literary criticism and theoretical foundations have grown by leaps and bounds to cover virtually every aspect of human existence and dialectical thoughts. Indeed, the organizational foundations of literary criticisms are the philosophical premise upon which literary analysis and criticism stand. They allow us to organize our thoughts by providing us with a framework within which to explore and interpret literary creations.

In *An Introduction to Literary Studies* (1999) Mario Klarer identifies four broad philosophical approaches to the reading of literature. These are: the textual, authorial, reader and contextual approaches. In her submissions, Klarer identifies a relationship among these approaches and submits that they do not assume the texts to be totally self-contained and independent by attempting to situate them in the larger context of their backgrounds which could be historical, cultural, authorial influences, social, environmental, genre, and gender, military, political or even linguistics (94). This observation becomes important when we consider the fact that today the theories of literature are emanating from different disciplines. They emanate from linguistics (Structuralism), political science and economy (Marxism), sociology (Feminism and Post-colonialism), psychology (Psychoanalysis) and cultural (New Historicism). The above

establishes that different approaches to the interpretation of literature have come from different disciplines and they all go to form what is now known and called the modern Literary Theory.

Consequently, while one finds several of these interpretative approaches occurring in a given literary analysis; it should nevertheless detract from the focus and arguments in a given study. For this paper, the theoretical framework we adopted included the Marxist and the post-colonial approaches. In other words, it studies the Marxist approach to literature as well as the response of the colonised to the colonialism.

The Socio-Economic History of the Caribbean People

The Caribbean region comprises a chain of mid-American islands flung and scattered, but forming a rough arch against the Atlantic Ocean. They stretch from the Virgin Island in the North to Curacao and Aruba lying off the coast of South America in the south. Specifically, they are made up of fifty one inhabitable islands: ranging from Cuba, the largest to Bequia (close to St. Vincent, about 18 square kilometres and with less than 3,000 inhabitants) which is the smallest. The history of these Caribbean islands and its people is so brutal that the inhabitants have seemingly been lost in its wake ever since:

It began abruptly with a definite event, the arrival of the first European discoverers in Columbus' fleet in 1492. (And) the present aspects of the islands have been shaped largely by events which took place after that date. (Parry and Sherlock v)

When Columbus and his crew arrived in these islands, they thought they had gone round the world and opened up a new sea route to India (which was their original quest), so they called the island the West Indies and the people West Indians, but they were very honestly wrong. However, in recent times, the term West Indians has come to refer to people who "share with the rest of the Caribbean the experience of colonialism, slavery and the plantation (but) whose particular metropolitan association was with Britain" (Sherlock 7).

The original inhabitants of these islands are the Caribs and the Arawaks. These are indigenous Amerindian tribes. As a group, they were quickly and effectively overrun by the white strangers from beyond the sea and have been largely decimated through repressive laws, oppressive force of arms and systematic elimination. As a result, they now form very negligible parts of these islands.

Unlike in nearby South America where the age-old Aztec and Inca civilizations were virtually wiped out in their craze for gold and search for the legendary El Dorado, the European craze in the Caribbean was for land and the control of sea trade. Indeed, these Caribbean islands due to their tropical, virgin, loamy and coral nature, proved to be very fertile ground for the provision of economic cash crops which newly industrializing Europe needed at this time. However, the attempt by the European to conscript these Amerindians into a labour force to work in the huge tobacco and later sugarcane plantations

they established, met with disaster as these Amerindians were not physically endowed for the strenuous jobs on these plantations.

To get around this challenge, the Europeans turned to Africa, which was being rapidly explored along its coastlines and waterways at this time. This led to the infernal slave trade in which millions of black Africans were tricked, captured or sold into slavery. These Africans were uprooted from their homelands, people and cultures and transported in terrible conditions across the hostile waters of the Atlantic into the strange New World. The voyage to the Americas was a living nightmare and overcrowding in their usually derelict ships was the least problem the white slavers had, as more slaves meant greater profit to them. John Hope Franklin captures this poignantly when he writes that “chained together by twos, hands and feet, the slaves had no room in which to move about and no freedom to exercise their bodies even in the slightest” (7).

To further exacerbate the plight of these Africans, slaves from particular regions and cultures in Africa were deliberately separated to prevent any form of bonding that could lead to the growth of a cohesive culture or aid rebellion. Families too were not spared these forced separations; which was to have a profound repercussion in family relationships in later Caribbean societies, where the male - father figure was more or less non-existent. Thus, slavery and colonisation in the Caribbean "involved the rupture of an individual's integration within family and community" (Obiechina 116).

However, the trade in human cargo was abolished by the Slave Abolition Act of 1833 and the emancipation of the blacks from slavery soon followed. The freed black slaves now had the option of continuing to work in these plantations for almost nothing or strike out on their own, which many did. However according to Obiechina, where the physical fetters of slavery were formally removed, the shackles of the mind and soul remained (103).

The immediate result of the emancipation on the plantations was a drastic drop in output and therefore profit. To get around this, the European turned to Asia and shipped in the East Indians, Malaysians and Chinese over as indentured labourers. This arrangement ensured that these new groups of people could not finance their way back to their homelands, which made them veritable slaves as they worked in the plantations for a pittance. This shipment of Asians into the Caribbean marked the final mass movement of a racial group in the region. As a result, the present inhabitants of this region became a hybrid of every racial colour in the world: the blacks, the whites, the browns and of course the various colour shades these admixtures would produce. In the Caribbean, the other colours (especially the blacks) outnumber the whites, but it is European tastes, sensibilities and cultural modes that predominate right from the days of the Amerindians.

The European colonising powers through policies, preferences and practices perpetuated their lordship and enhanced their economic status when they employed the proverbial divide-and-rule technique, alienating one race from the other and playing them off against

the other. The plantation slavery and colonialism further eroded whatever cohesion the people could ever hope to evolve. This resulted in non-ownership of land, a class system based on race and colour shades and a set of attitudes and education that culminated in the people becoming lost, confused and rootless in an ever changing world. As George Lamming puts it:

Caribbean society was never conceived as the coming together of a people with any design for social living.... The history of our region continued to be the history of extreme contradictions: the contradictions between men perceived as instruments of production, and labour experienced as the basis for social living. (Drayton and Andaiye 202 - 203).

However, following a series of labour unrests and political upheavals in the 1940s and 50s, many of these Caribbean islands were granted independence in the 60s. But many all too soon became quasi-independent due to the dependency which their peculiar slavery and colonial experiences had imposed on them. These massive social-economic problems led to another notable event in the experience of the people - the emigration to other lands, usually to the parent nation of their respective former colonial masters which they had been brought up to see as home.

Closely linked with the above is the collapse of the West Indian Federation in 1962 - a federation of Caribbean islands within the British Commonwealth. It included: Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad as well as other British colonies in the Windward and Leeward islands. It collapsed in 1962 when Jamaica and Trinidad withdrew to become independent nations. This fragmentation led to the disintegration of the dream of one West Indian nation forged as a unified entity with one common language and relatively common social ties.

The immediate reaction by an already frustrated and disillusioned people was mass migration to foreign lands where their identities in terms of race, nation, colour and even dialect became charged with problems. Indeed, given the 'separateness' of the people, colours and even islands, the Caribbean man found it difficult to realize personal, national and even regional cohesion. Their peculiar experience over the centuries has left them as a people without a solid past, with an ephemeral present and a nebulous future. Little wonder C. L. R James in his literary wisdom pronounced that, "we are what we are because we have been what we have been" (qtd. in Wilson Harris 72).

Theoretical Framework - Marxism, Literature and Historical Psychology

Like in every issue in the academic world, including the social sciences and the sciences, Marxist philosophies is also found in literature. In fact, modern literary criticism has been influenced by extant Marxist ideologies. In the Marxist philosophical school of thought, history and literature are critical components of the realities, also called the superstructure which is a product of the base realities. According to Aditya Kumar Panda:

Marxist approach relates literary text to the society, to the history and cultural and political systems in which it is created. It does not consider a literary text, devoid of its writer and the influences on the writer. A writer is a product of his own age which is itself a product of many ages.

Anti-colonial novels like *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *Weep Not Child* by the recently deceased Ngugi wa Thiong 'O and even Ferdinand Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal* trace the history of the advent of the white man into Africa, the starts of colonialism, the white domination over the natives of Africa as well as the reactions and resistance of the Africans against colonial domination. Many such literary pieces witness the social historical and political processes which happen in the real world.

History and literature combine to form the existentialist philosophies of the humankind and in the Marxist approach to literature; the existential school of thought readily comes into play. Interestingly, the father of existentialist studies, Jean Paul Sartre once described existentialism as “an ideological moment within Marxism” in his essay “Search for a Method” (*The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) where he submitted that existentialism has become a subordinate branch of Marxism and will enrich it. Indeed, colonialism and its accompanying good and evil is the necessary offshoot of historical changes necessitated by the material realities of life or lives, and not necessarily because of what the Marxist calls the ideological superstructure. As it stands therefore, it is the Human existence in a real, tangible world that determines who that human being is as well as his thoughts and philosophies.

Thus, literary text exists in socio-historical, cultural, political and philosophical contexts which this paper will attempt to unravel through the imaginations of George Lamming within a given period and time in our chosen text. Consequently, “the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle” posits Karl Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). The Marxist approach to literature therefore must necessarily fall within the following parameters:

- Class history and class struggle in a chosen literary text(s).
- Narratives of domination and oppression.
- Fight over land and possessions
- Racial tension and discrimination
- Narratives of boycotts, riots and violence

After the highly consequential October 1917 revolution in Russia, the Marxist approach to literature took hold of literary discourses and all writings were now largely being seen through the prism of socialist realism. This method of analysis demands not only the truth of the writer's narratives but the narration must have revolutionary contents geared towards mobilizing and/or reorienting the people, especially the working class, to revolt against the oppressive ruling class. All these motions and more were captured and highlighted in George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin*.

This approach took the life struggle of working class, whether of farming or factory or any other field, into account. It described them as they were when they were working, when they were struggling, when they were achieving their goals. Such ideas of socialist realism inspired literature and in Russia, it generated a belief that a writing is influenced by both the author's subjective factors and the influence she/he receives from her/his surroundings. (Aditya Kumar)

From our discussion so far, it is obvious that the Marxists view literature and therefore philosophy: “as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era” (Abrams 149). And these are the histories upon which George Lamming based our chosen text.

Generally, writers and critics of the Marxist school tend to exhibit a deep rapport with the historical in their works as they weave the intricate network between the past, they make come alive, and the living present. Indeed, each time we pick up works emanating from this school, they not only relate a past we should be aware of, but also transport us into becoming active participants in that past with a view to appraising our present as we advance into the future. No wonder Ngugi declares in his literary wisdom that “it is only in a socialist context that a look at yesterday can be meaningful in illuminating today and tomorrow” (qtd. in Christopher Heywood 8). Doing an appraisal of our study text the way we intend to would therefore afford us the opportunity to have a Birdseye view of the socio-economics situation as well as the reactions of the people of Creighton village to the ravages of the Whiteman's coming to their island. We will also examine how they mobilized themselves to confront the Machiavellian intentions of their oppressors.

The Marxists hold that literature is an active form of societal consciousness, given its innate ability to arouse and mobilize people to action and thus becomes an ideological weapon, with historical fiction a most vibrant tool in this regard. Nigerian critic, Jide Balogun avers in his article “Approaches to Modern Literary Theories” that practitioners of the Marxist literary school must be able “to reconstruct history, reveal the perennial social contradictions, to consciencise the masses and prepare them for mass action in the course of the transformation of society from economic oppression to a classless one” (204). In other words, they must be able to transform a society by representing its eroded past to it and teach it to have dignity in the present and a hope for the future.

Indeed, Marxism's tendency to associate society, and therefore history, with the arts is taken for granted and according to Wilbur Scott, scholars “have long been interested in the ties between the art, the writer and the social milieu, and very often their studies contain implicit judgments based on those association. But the associations are not simple” (126). Finally on this association between society and literature which forms the bedrock of

Marxist readings, it is clear that the relationship between literature and society is both symbiotic and reciprocal in the sense that literature is not only the effect of social causes, but can also be the cause of social effects.

Since Marxism intertwines with history in documenting the literature of particular groups of people, it becomes necessary to examine the psychology and history of these people with a view to determining why they are the way they are today and why their literatures are suffused with particular imagery and thematic scopes. A brief review of the book *Problems of Historical Psychology* will greatly help our cause. Barbu in his Introduction to *Problems of Historical Psychology* describes a historical event as an “attribute which can be assigned to an event, or group of events which have marked a change in the way of life of a community of people. The events can be in their nature, political, economic, cultural, psychological, and even physical” (11).

The one major historical event which cuts across Africa and the Caribbean is that unfortunate encounter with the white man which led to their conquest, subjugation and ultimately colonisation. And since that encounter, the lives, thoughts and actions of the colonised have not been the same as their very present and future still bear the scars of that historical collision. The above may have prompted renowned West Indian critic and writer, C.L.R James in his literary wisdom to pontificate that “we are the product of a very complicated historical past and all of it is in us striving or at any rate ready for expression. We are an adventurous people, ready for anything. We are what we are because we have been what we have been” (qtd. in Wilson Harris 72).

Consequently, we would equally endeavour to examine the nexus between these people and their history as well as their psychology by discarding all pretensions to rationality because we would be interfacing with the erraticism of the human mind or in our case, the collective consciousness of a people seen through particular individuals and their reactions to their history.

Text Analysis

The thematic preoccupation of George Lamming's novel *In the Castle of My Skin* are essentially those of: colonialism and class struggle, in the work issue of colonial exploitation, subjugation of the people through economic and political means as well as the general fallout from the resistance of the people to colonialism are the major thrust. The themes therefore are mainstream Marxist

The first major theme in the work is that of class struggle and class consciousness as well as the delineation of the classes by their skin colours. The novel portrays the exploitation of the working class by the colonializing white man which clearly reveals the socio-economic as well as socio-political disparities in Creighton Village, Barbados. The novel was narrated through the eyes of an eponymous hero, the Boy G; whom many critics say stands for George Lamming – a fact that was however neither denied nor confirmed by the

author. The protagonist's journey illustrates the development of class consciousness, as he becomes aware of the injustices, he becomes restless and begins to question the status quo. Indeed, as the consciousness of the writer grew, that of the society also grew until it converged to a state of directly opposing the colonial enterprise.

In *African Literature Today* vol.11, Juris Silenieks posits that “for many writers of the Caribbean region, historical identity is one of their principal preoccupations proceeding directly from the complexities of their situation” (161). The first few pages of the novel firmly establish the above idea. We find the child narrator frantically attempting to locate and situate himself and consequently his people in history, but he fails because there is no history to look back upon, as his mother rightly tells him.

A major historical fallout from the colonial experiences the people in Creighton village and indeed the whole of the Caribbean is the question of land ownership. The narrator in *In the Castle of My Skin* tells us "few people could ever buy land" (233). The issue of plantation slavery and colonization ensures that all land in the New World is held in the collective hands of the whites - represented by Mr. Creighton in this case. He owns the whole village not merely symbolically by nomenclature, but physically as landlord. The scenario reminds one of Africa's Kenya, Congo and Rhodesia before independence where choice and expansive land portions were held and owned by white settlers, while the blacks were disinherited. Thus clearly apparent in the novel is the historical fact that colonization is a predicament of land possession in the West Indies.

Closely linked with the land question for the Caribbean man is the house issue - since he owns no land to call his own. Indeed, the Caribbean man's rootlessness in history becomes more apparent, making him to hold unto whatever he calls a house with the fierce but futile tenacity of a drowning man clutching at straw. A character in the novel, Mr. Foster, puts this in perspective when he remarks “...Your own house. A man ain't a man till he can call the house he live in my own. And it ain't matter how small it be once you can call it my own house” (232). Without a land to call his own therefore, the Caribbean man now clings to the house where he dwells and to that inner dwelling inside him, which effectively becomes the private *castle of his skin*.

Yet another aspect of this land - house question from the historical perspective in the novel is that it puts the West Indian at the mercy of the landlord who could eject him on a whim. This ugly scenario plays out towards the end of the novel when the villagers were evicted from the land bought by the emerging indigenous middle class. Thus, in spite of generations of extensive settlements of blacks on the island, they remain landless in a land their forefathers tilled for the whites as slaves, their freed parents paid rents on and from which they, finally, are dispossessed.

Indeed, left alone, dumped and forgotten in the New World, the black slaves may have had little chance of self-direction, but the pressure of colonialism and their historical legacy

destroyed that slim possibility. This state of mind leads to them accepting the erroneous founding fallacies of western humanism and the slavery institution - that blacks are inferior to whites. This in turn has led to the paternalistic and patronizing attitudes of the whites towards the black, perpetrated through their pseudo-magnanimous feudal system. In the novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, the dehumanizing paternalism depicted in the social structure of colonialism as capitalist inclined as opposed to the communist preaching of Marxism. It especially relegates the villagers to the status of lesser beings who can hardly think for themselves. They are seen more or less like retarded children whose development, historical or otherwise has been arrested. All these tendencies are what a revolutionized Marxist mindset can easily change.

George Lamming's first foray into the thematic concern of exile was initially seen in the life of the characters, Trumper, who upon his return from the United States "has a better grasp and appreciation of the situation in Barbados," (*Homecoming* 128). However, Lamming settles fully into this theme with the last few lines of his first novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, when the eponymous hero, Boy G is on the verge of removing himself from Barbados to Trinidad on the first leg of his exilic journey to England. As the narrator puts it: "The earth where I walked was a marvel of blackness and I knew in a sense deeper than simple departure I had said farewell, farewell to the land" (295).

Conclusion

From our readings in the novel thus far and our explorations of its more Marxist themes, it is quite obvious that George Lamming advertently or inadvertently explored the revolutionary dynamics between the socio-economic and political existence of the people of Creighton Village, Barbados. Consequently, the work can be said to illustrate the nexus between what Marxist scholars would call the base and the superstructure. The base in this instance is the colonial experience: oppression and exploitation, while the superstructure becomes the socio-cultural and ideological institutions. The novel thus satirises the way and manner the colonial ideology subsumed the sensibilities of the people to bring about pseudo-consciousness to the people; while masking the true nature of the oppression and the socio-economic emasculation. By exploring these themes, Lamming's novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, juxtaposes colonialism with western style capitalism which he counterbalances with the Marxist and communist option, by foregrounding the imperative for resistance, rebellion and revolution in the pursuit of a free, just and more equitable life for the inhabitants of Creighton Village Barbados and by extension to the peoples and nations of the Caribbean and even to Africa where a good proportion of the West Indians emanated from.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M.H, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. (2012). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. (9th edition) Cengage Learning.
- Balogun, Jide. (2007). "Approaches to Modern Literary Theories." *Critical Perspectives*

on *English Language and Literature*. Edited by Olu Obafemi, et al, pp.197 - 206.
 Barbu, Zevedei. (1960). *Problems of Historical Psychology*. Routledge/Kegan Paul.
 Barthold, Bonnie. (1981). *Black Time*. Yale University Press.
 Drayton, Richard and Andaiye, (1992). Editors, *Conversations: George Lamming: Essays, Addresses and Interviews 1953 – 1990*. Karia Press.

Franklin, John Hope. (1980). *From Slavery to Freedom*. Alfred Knopf.
 Fraught, Richard (1971). Editor. *Black Society in the New World*. Random House.
 Harris, Wilson. (1967). *Tradition, the Writer and Society*. New Beacon.
 Heywood, Christopher. (1982), Editor. *Perspectives on African Literature*. Heinemann,
 Jean Paul Sartre, (1960). *The Critique of Dialectic Reason*, Verso: London/New York.
 Klarer, Mario. (1999). *An Introduction to Literary Studies*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
 Kumar, Aditya, (2015), “**Marxist Approach to Literature: An Introduction,**” *Journal of Teaching and Research In English Literature*, JTREL - January 2015. Volume VI Number 3
 Lamming, George. (1983). *In the Castle of My Skin*. Schocken Books.
 Marx, Karl. and Engels, Friedrich. (1969). *The Communist Manifesto*, Progress Publishers: Moscow.
 Obiechina, E.N., (1986). Editor. "Africa in the Soul of Dispersed Children." *Nsukka Studies in African Literature*. vol. 4, pp. 103 – 117.
 Parry, J.A and Sherlock, P.M. (1968), *A Short History of the West Indies*. Macmillan.

Scott, Wilbur. (1962), *Five Approaches to Literary Criticism*. Collier Books.
 Sherlock, P.M. (1966). *West Indies*. Thames and Hudson.
 Silenieks, Juris. (1980.). “Prophetic Visions of the Past.” *African Literature Today* vol. 11: *Myth and History*. Edited by Eldred Durosimi Jones. Heinemann.
 Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. (1972). *Homecoming*. London, Heinemann.