



**GEORGE LAMMING'S NOVEL *IN THE CASTLE OF MY SKIN*:
A TRIBUTE TO THE BLACK WEST INDIANS**

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Abstract: George Lamming in his novels dismantles the colonial structures and forces that militated against his mind. By elevating his mind to the sovereignty of imagination, Lamming attempts to deliver the blacks from the "terror of the mind" and empower themselves to define and assert Black Consciousness, which invariably strengthens Black identity and dignity. Black Consciousness is an attitude of mind, a way of life. It empowers the black man the basic tenets of life to reject all value systems that seek to make him a stranger in his own country and reduces his basic human dignity. The novels of George Lamming are rich with value systems that would enable a black man to define himself rather than be defined by others.

Key words: Racialization, Caribbean black, Colonialism, Subjectivity.

In the Castle of My Skin is a historical novel of the West Indies and an autobiographical novel in which Lamming authorises his "self" to speak on behalf of cross-continental black communities. Through imperial domination and racialization, the blacks in general, the Caribbean blacks in particular have been imprisoned in their blackness. The novel explores the underlying causes of black subjectivity in his village, in Barbados. The villagers suffer from acute reflective self consciousness which separates man from himself. Colonialism has sustained its power by controlling the mind of the colonised. The novel traces the complex colonial experience that captures the consciousness of the whole village. The villagers have no



knowledge of their land and history. The author identifies himself with the character G.

In the colonial environment the black man lives with what Dubois calls "double consciousness" as he is caught between the "white Other and black consciousness". The novel wonderfully traces how G awakens to the "higher consciousness" by rendering self - asserting view point when he makes a classic statement: "The likenesses will meet and make merry, but they won't know you. They won't know the you that's hidden somewhere in the castle of your skin". Thus the novel proves that the powerful colonial structures could not subdue or erase the original self of a black man. The "you" is the "divine self", the "original self". G is sensitized by his friend Trumper about the concept of "race" and "my people" and that he could attain this racial consciousness only in other white countries through facing racial discrimination. The character of Pa has been explored to reveal that the greatness of a person lies not in the richness of the white skin but on the content of his character.

Lamming in his nonfiction *The Pleasures Of Exile* writes his own reasons for writing the novel. "...the meaning of Papa's departure is the story of *In The Castle of My Skin*" (228). Lamming wanted to bind himself eternally to Pa and this novel is the outcome of his longing. Lamming has gathered up all the broken pieces of planks and bits of memory and has rebuilt it beautifully for a memorial on Pa. The broken pieces resemble the shattered lives of the West Indians. Lamming committed himself to represent the life of the deprived masses, he has made a dramatic departure from the tradition of the upper middle class English tradition he reconstructs the shattered life of Pa and moulds into a map of powerful experience

"...This rock had returned in the shape of a wreath bound by hard covers and abundant with words which told his way of talking" (Pleasures 229). On this rock Papa should always remain. Pa



represents the peasant folk of the village whose internal lives were thought to be not so important to record. Through writing a novel, Lamming salvaged the dignity of blacks from the rubble of confusion. Thus the novel gains a pivotal place in the canon of Caribbean literature. The title of the text is taken from the poem, 'Juvenilia' of the West Indian poet, Derek Walcott. As Lamming explains, the words were actually spoken by a black to a white in a torrent of rage and hatred, "you in the Castle of your skin, I among the swineherd" (229). Lamming changes the possessive pronoun, thus reversing the entire situation and seizes the Castle for himself and transforms the situation from deprivation into plenitude.

The utterance of the Black man scorns contemptuously the so called superiority of the white skin which forever negates and inferiorizes the black skin. Lamming enumerates the black dignity. "In spite of his black skin Papa could never see himself among swine, nor could the village" (Pleasures 228). The negative attitude has been changed, though Pa is separated from his original home, deprived of his house and distanced from his loved ones. It looks as though Pa has lost everything in this world he has nothing but "the richness of his skin" and 'concealed wisdom' which he has left as legacy for his people to feel proud of and to come out of that hiding from the castle of their skin as victors and not as vanquishers that is Lamming's message for his people.

Lamming further points "That journey was a lesson in exile and permanence; that night was a colonial example of alienation" (Pleasures 228). The old man's dispossession from his village and his consequent journey to the Alms house contains a valuable lesson. His air of dignity, tolerance and tidiness with which he carried himself has won him the status of 'the Great' which is usually limited only to the whites. During the face of dispossession he did not explode like Mr. Foster or shoemaker. He is a man of great spiritual strength for "...he



had never been dissolute. He never seemed to regret anything, not even the present poverty which is tolerable" (Castle 252). The strength and courage with which Pa has confronted the cruel situation would strengthen his people as "the old man had a mind and the mind was the man" (252). He has faced the dispossession like a 'Man' and has exhibited an attitude of tolerance in the time of crisis. There has never been a disgruntled spirit in Pa, nor is there any grudge against Slime who is responsible for his dispossession. With stable composure he declares that Slime has taught lessons to the school children and now "...twas the big ones he want to teach a lesson" (254). Both of them are in exile, Papa to the Alms house and G to Trinidad. Sentimental attachment to the land makes the land sacred.

There is hope and dignity in G's farewell. If Pa's departure demonstrates a positive attitude, G reflects from the cumulative experience and declares, "The earth where I walked was a marvel of blackness, and I knew in a sense more deep than simple departure I had said farewell, farewell to the land" (303). He realizes the beauty of blackness thus giving shape for a positive consciousness to the black psyche.

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