

THE HISTORICAL NOVEL: COLONIALISM IN GEORGE LAMMING'S *IN THE CASTLE OF MY SKIN*

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Abstract

*This paper analyzed the concept of the historical novel and situated it within the confines of George Lamming's thematic thrusts of colonialism in his pioneer novel **In the Castle of My Skin** (1953). The examination of the deployment of history both as a thematic and stylistic tool remained perhaps one of the most important perspectives that could be used in assessing the colonial and migratory scopes of West Indian or Caribbean literature. Indeed, that historical encounter with the white man have been a most febrile story source for her writers, providing "the impetus and even the motivation for much of the literary production in the continent" (Ogwude 2011). The postcolonial literary theory guided our explorations as we embarked on our literary adventure. The Marxist literary theorist Gregory Lukacs' position on **The Historical Novel** (1962), as well as ZeverdeiBarbu's book **Problems of Historical Psychology** (1960) equally assisted with our conclusions which held that the traumatic experience of colonialism took a huge toll on both the colonized and the colonizer.*

Key Words: Historical Novel, postcolonialism, hybridization, Caribbean, migratory.

INTRODUCTION

Postcolonialism is what? Like every non-definitive concept, the term post-colonialism does not have a paucity of definitions given its highly relative nature and depending on which side of the fence or school of literature one is speaking from. But let us go to the very beginnings of this concept. Not a few persons have said that Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978), more or less kick started the study of post-colonial literary criticism on a loftier platform. In this work which has become most prominent in post-colonial criticism, Said, a Palestinian writer who was credited to have moved colonial discourse into the front burner of western literary and cultural theory, did a:

... specific exposé of the Eurocentric universalism which takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western and the inferiority of what is not. Said identifies a European cultural tradition of 'Orientalism', which is a particular and long-standing way of

identifying the East as 'Other' and inferior to the West. (Barry 2013:186)

According to him, there is a subtle, calculated and consistent European prejudice against everything (thoughts, cultures and philosophies) that does not emanate from western civilization. In other words, the colonial powers and their apparatuses including personnel, view issues solely through their own culturally determined prisms, which is often highly limited and therefore jaundiced. For them, everything white and western is beautiful, desirable and urbane, while everything from the 'others' is considered ugly, undesirable and mundane.

The Concept of Post-colonialism: Now, given that the phrase 'post' is a prefix implying 'after' when attached to the word 'colonialism', a closer look at the latter would not be out of place here. Colonialism by a simple definition would mean the conquest and domination of a nation/culture/people over other nations/cultures/people beyond its borders. Clearly, there are two broad sides to colonialism. The first one is the military conquest of colonies (often in Africa and the Caribbean, including Asia and the Americas) and their physical occupation by the colonisers, while the second one is the psychological conquest or what is generally described as the subjugation and occupation of the minds and civilization of the conquered people. It is worthy to note here too that the attainment of independence by these colonised nations did not quite signal the end of colonialism; indeed, both Africa and the Caribbean have had a greater output of literature thematically exploring colonialism well after their independence.

At face value therefore, the word post-colonialism refers to a period of time after colonialism, while post-colonial literature would seem to apply to literary output by people living in countries formerly colonised by other nations. Now, whether these literatures are written prior to, during or immediately after the advent of colonialism is another issue. A simple description of post-colonial literature however, would have it as literatures that capture the interactions between Western nations and the peoples/cultures they colonised, while post-colonial studies become:

The critical analysis of the history, culture, literature and modes of discourse that are specific to former colonies of England, Spain, France and other European imperial powers. (Abrams and Harpham 2012: 306)

In other words, post-colonial criticism could be described as critical strategies used to analyse the writing and reading of literature, politics, arts and even history of all former colonies. But would places like the United States of America, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, all former colonies of the United Kingdom fall into this description? And then, there is the issue of works emanating from the colonising nations.

In extending his definition of post-colonial studies, M. H Abrams and Harpham answer the poser above when they posit that sometimes post-colonialism also encompasses:

... aspects of British literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, viewed through a perspective that reveals the ways in which the social and economic life represented in that literature was tacitly underwritten by colonial exploitation. (Abrams and Harpham 2012: 306)

This implies that post-colonial criticism could also refer to sets of theories used to read and analyse literary outputs from the colonising nations which deal specifically with colonisation and/or the colonised. However, in whatever manner it emerges, post-colonial theoretical discourses always endeavour to focus on the oppressed and their reactions under colonisation as well as the impact of colonialism on the oppressors themselves. Historically ironic, the phrase post-colonial studies was said to have been coined in and for academia in British universities. And as aptly put by Ashcroft et al, in its broadest sense, the term post-colonial:

Cover [s] all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. (2007: 2)

Consequently, this study holds that post-colonial theory is essentially an intellectual discourse module made up of reactions to the reality of colonialism and its legacies. It basically explores art forms, though it deals more with literature, emanating from former colonised territories or literary outputs emanating from colonising countries whose major themes and subject matters deal with colonisation or colonised people. Indeed, the post-colonial debacle is a two-can-play situation as both the colonised and the coloniser scramble to tell the world their story from their own perspective. Essentially therefore, post-colonial theory is built around the principle of a world of binary opposites, along the Manichean idea, a philosophical dualism that sees the

world as divided into mutually exclusive opposites. Consequently, it is structured around the concept of resistance -a sort of it-takes-two-to-tangle or a force and counter force situation. Indeed, if the first step towards a post-colonial perspective is to reclaim one's own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which that past has been devalued. (Barry 2013)

The Historical Novel - Theories and Concepts: Two key words stand out in the phrase 'historical novel'; while the former is an adjective, the latter is a noun. However, being a subgenre of the novel form, the historical novel is primarily a literary piece than a mere work of history. But the questions must be asked: when is a novel a mere rewriting of history and when is it an astute piece of literature? In the light of this, Carlos Mata Indurain writes that:

We can see that here lies one of the main dangers of this type of narrative; because of its very nature, the historical novel is a hybrid genre, a mixture of invention and reality. (Indurain. 2009: 2)

Since almost every novel is historical in one way or another, a straight-forward and generally accepted definition may not be possible because of the ambiguity it will further engender. However, we may get around this when we consider certain salient features a historical novel must have. However, that having history as a theme does not necessarily make a work historical, Spanish philologist, linguist and literary critic, Amado Alonso admonishes that:

The historical novel is not one that narrates or describes events and things that occurred or were existent, nor even - as is usually accepted - one that relates things about the public life of a people, but specifically that which aims to reconstruct a past way of life and to offer it as past, in its far off times, with that monumentality arouses in us. (qtd. in Indurain.2009: 1)

In other words, the past the novelist recreates and unravels in his plots and characters must be able to come alive in the present, to become a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past (Carr 30). Consequently, the main thrust of the historical novel therefore, should not be a mere recounting of the narratives of past peoples, events and places:

...but the poetic awakening of the people who featured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality. (Lukacs. 1962:44)

In this paper however, we may have to settle for the observations of Carlos Mata Indurain cited to the effect that:

The greatest difficulty for the historical novelist lies in finding a stable equilibrium between the historical element and characters, and fictional elements and characters, without one of the two aspects drowning out the other. If it errs too much in the direction of reconstructing the past, it will cease to be novel to become a scholarly historical work; in contrast, by default the novel will be historical in name if its actions take place in the past and it introduces a few themes and pseudo-historical characters. (Indurain. 2009: 2)

Ultimately therefore, it is the fine and delicate balance between the science of historical documentation and the art of literature that make a work historical fiction or otherwise. In other words, according to Richard Maxwell: “History was about what happened; fiction about what should have happened (and) history gave priority to the demands of knowledge, fiction to the demands of narrative (Maxwell 2009).

Consequently, writes Jerome de Groot “the intergeneric hybridity and flexibility of historical fiction have long been its defining characteristic” (Groot 2010). Nevertheless, the historical novel must to a large extent assume certain characteristics, especially when history is interfaced with literature. Indeed, the salient features of the historical fiction should include but not limited to:

- The setting back from the time of writing must be considerable. A good recession of time between the time of writing and the subject of writing must be observed.
- The literature must be based on real characters and true events and not merely a total contraption of the writers' imagination.
- The third one is for the work to both maintain and express the temper of the time being written about. It must capture the essential decor of the time it portrays in the story it tells or the plot it unravels. (*from an informal discussion with the Late Prof. Ben Obumsele in Enugu, Nigeria 2014*)

Even though there were historical works before his time, the precursor of the historical novel is generally taken to be Walter Scott as all his works meet the above criteria. He wrote in the 1800s but most of the events and characters he describes date back to the 1600s. For instance, in his work *Ivanhoe* (1820), the set back is about 200 years. It is that considerable recession of time that is the hallmark of the historical novel and must be close to the theme of the story. What Scott did was to go back to the old days in Scotland to the time of the rebellion, to the periods just after the 1600s. Also, he took great care to maintain and express the temper of the time, even as he effectively captured the historical decor of the period. In his works, we come face to face with castles and elves, knights, belfries (horses,) friars, monks and abbots. It is this going back to a specific event of history that makes the historical novel.

Conversely however, a book can be steeped in history without necessarily being described as a historical novel or work, as the writer's particular focus and purpose must come into play. For instance, the great writer Charles Dickens' stories are often researched fifty or more years back but his works are more social than historical. The recession of time is there, the decor is there, but the writer's vision becomes the deciding factor here. So, a work can describe events in history without being a historical novel.

For Lukacs, history is more of a social process than a dead past, as the past now comes alive in the present in a more interactive and meaningful way, even as he remarks that “what matters therefore in the historical novel is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events” (Lukacs 1962), while Sophia Ogwude states in *Bessie Head: An Exile Writing on Home* that:

The relationship between history and literature is an obvious one. Since the relevance of the writer rests primarily on his demonstration of an awareness of the public events around him. ... The need for relevance in the enterprise of literary production will compel the literary artist to be aware of history. Therefore, there is a sense in which most creative works of art, if not all, can be said to be historical (Ogwude 1998:27)

However, while Imelkiddeh posits that in a “general sense every writer and every artist is a historian of his time” (Ikiddeh 1984) when confronted with the issue of trying to draw a nexus between literature and history, Abrams and Harpham (2012) categorically state in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* that: the historical novel not only takes its setting and some characters and even events from history, but makes the

historical events and issues crucial for the central characters (who may themselves be historical personages) for the course of the narrative.

Consequently, intense historical inquiry, as opposed to a cursory enquiry or a more clinical digging around for why and not a mere stating of the obvious, becomes the preferred tool of use here to create what Lukacs describes as the lessons of history laying precepts upon which a reasonable society and a reasonable state can be established (Lukacs 1962). Following from this position, he then argues that Scott uses history as a tool to unravel individual characters and therefore the norms and mores of that individual's society.

A robust historical fiction work therefore must contain two broad elements: the particular or personal and the general and broad. Richard Maxwell calls this particular history and secret history (Maxwell 2009), with the latter requiring an understanding of the inner workings of the character or society's mind to fully grasp the importance of historical happenstances and even characters.

Giving a definitive appraisal and summary of Lukacs' *The Historical Novel*, South African writer and critic de Groot remarks that:

It represents historical process, and in doing so gestures towards actual historical progress. The realism of the novel allows the reader to engage with and empathise with historical individuals and thence gain a sense of their own historical specificity. It is able to communicate to people a sense of their own historicity, and the ways that they might be able to construct historically inflected identities for themselves. The historical novel has a humanist impulse to teach and educate, and this pedagogical element is crucial for Lukacs; it is the movement to historicised revelation and understanding which is the point of the exercise. (Groot 2010: 29)

The historical fiction therefore has both an aesthetic and more importantly, a didactic function and helps today's world better understand and appreciate past events, people and places.

In the Castle of My Skin- Colonialism: All of George Lamming's literary works are steeped in the history of the Caribbean man and his interaction with the white man, even though he writes more from a sense of history. He draws copiously from the past of the people, as reflected in the work of this study, *In the Castle of My Skin*, where he

examines the issues of history and the historiography in the colonial West Indies. Indeed, the psyche and history of the people that emerge from the societies depicted in Lamming's novels bear testament to the writer's story telling skills in remembering the cultural history of his people.

Thus, the colonial experience is one single thread holding Lamming's works together, while the novel form has been his most useful tool.

Commenting on the subject of history and the writer in an interview with George Kent, Lamming states that:

The colonial experience is a matter of historical record. What I'm saying is that the colonial experience is a live experience in the consciousness of the people. And just because the so-called colonial situation is over and its institution may have been transferred into something else, it is a fallacy to think that the human-lived content of those situations are automatically transferred into something else too. The experience is a continuing psychic experience that has to be dealt with long after the actual colonial situation formally 'ends'. (qtd. in Sandra Paquet 1982: 1)

Lamming's novels generally explore the origin, structure and organization of society and the extent to which human transactions in terms of actions, inactions and responses affect society. Working from the individual and particular experiences, he ferrets out the lives and histories of his people and examines them in relation to the general and universal to reveal the existentialism of the human condition.

According to Sandra Paquet, George Lamming:

writes out of an acute social consciousness that is vitally concerned with politics and society, that is, with the function of power in a given society and its effect on the moral, social, cultural, and even aesthetic values of the people in that society.... His novels deal specifically with colonization as the political and economic history which informs the quality of life in his home island of Barbados, the Caribbean and Western Europe. (Sandra Paquet 1982: 1)

Even though Lamming's works are steeped in history, a serious look through them would reveal that he writes more from a sense of history than a stock of history - that

is, not having a historical continuum to call his own. Indeed, since the history of the West Indies has been violently disrupted and circumvented by the European adventurer Columbus and his crew, the products of that encounter have no clear past to both recall and fall back to to situate their present and project into their future.

For Lamming, therefore, history takes on a more active sense rather than the benign one proffered by the Europeans.

Stating his case in "The Occasion for Speaking", he opines that:

I am using the term, history, in an active sense. Not a succession of episodes which can easily be given some casual connection. What I mean by historical event is the creation of a situation which offers antagonistic oppositions and a challenge of survival that had to be met by all involved. (36)

In the same article, Lamming confesses that he tackles the effect and influence of this history in his works on three broad levels which he submits should be the role and responsibility of the writer in his society: the inner world of the writer - his hidden self, his world of social relations and commitments as well as the world of the community of men (36 -39), to whom the writer is ultimately responsible in his "essential need to find meaning to his destiny" (qtd. in Bogues 12).

In her "Introduction" to *The Novels of George Lamming* (1982), Sandra Paquet declares that:

Lamming's emphasis on colonial history as the appropriate context for exploring the peculiarities of contemporary West Indian experience, his 'preoccupation with fiction as an instrument of social transformation, shape the distinctive features of his art. In his novels, individual human experience is always circumscribed by historical and political circumstances.... This allows him to portray the complexities of the total society within the parameters of personal and social relationships among a representative community. (Sandra Paquet 1982: 4)

On her own part, foremost post-colonial theorist and critic, Helen Tiffin, writing in *A Review of International English Literature* vol.10, no. 4, opines that:

George Lamming's works also have been from the beginning concerned with West Indian history, and his method of writing has been governed by what he has termed "the informing influence of history on the imaginative rendering of character." (qtd. in Tiffin 1979:38).

Consequently, writing more from his sense of history rather than from the history of the people - in terms of an untrammelled past - Lamming's works, apart from the novel *Natives of My Persons*, do not exactly fit into our earlier set out criteria for the historical novel, but they are nevertheless historical because they were able to maintain the temper and ethos of a period in the history of the Caribbean man. For instance, the novel *In the Castle of My Skin* does not have that real recession of time between the history and the time of writing, but they nevertheless effectively enliven the immediate past and contemporary times of the people as at the time of writing. Indeed, Lamming's causal and temporal elements, including the characters he depicts in these works are realistic, lucid and extremely picturesque while capturing the life of his people in all its complexities.

However, in the case of the Caribbean people captured in *In the Castle of My Skin*, there is no discernible history on which to build and upon that blight their societies emerge from the crucible of chaos. The original inhabitants of the land are physically and psychologically brutalized as to forget everything about their indigenous culture and history. The next wave of people on these islands comprises forced emigrants from several nations, tribes and continents who are again emasculated from both themselves and their indigenous societies.

George Lamming's first work, *In the Castle of My Skin*, opens on a note that seeks to clutch at a history the narrator barely understands. A kaleidoscope of consciousness seeking to explore the pseudo-history of a people is immediately thrown at the reader as we come in contact with the eponymous hero of the work – Boy G. Prima facie, the sense of history here is at best one caught in that groggy state between sleep and full wakefulness. The mood of historical limbo at once catches the reader in an eye contest from which it refuses to blink even at the close of the book. Indeed, this restless historical state occasioned by the colonial experience becomes the central most dominant idea in the work.

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 (slavery and colonial) 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. In this opening episode, the deep soul search Boy G makes about rainfall on his ninth birthday mirrors his attempt to place himself in the chaotic wetness that graces the day of his birth and therefore his history, to see what the future holds for him and his people. No wonder, the hero captures his birthday in this lamentation:

...and I wept for the watery waste of my ninth important day... 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. (1980:1 - 2)

In *Black Time* (1981), Bonnie Barthold aptly captures the above thought when he writes that "In Lamming's novels, the world itself is in a state of flux and the boy's growth... coincides with the chaotic movement of the world he inhabits" (150). This restlessness leading to the probing question about rainfall during his birthday, which could easily read as a dampener on his people's history, leads to an even more profound quest. The question: mum, where is my root, where is my family? must have played on the hero's mind when he remarks:

And for memory I had substituted inquiry.
'Where you say my grandmother went?
'To Panama,' my mother answered...
'And my uncle who was your brother?

'My brother went to America,' my mother said. 'it's years now. The last we heard he was on a boat and then take sick, and is probably dead for all we know.' Her feelings were neutral.

'And when my uncle who was your brother and my grandmother who was your mother, when they went away, how old you wus?'

'Two.'
Two years?'
'Yes, two,' my mother said. (4)

Clearly, the hero's attempt to discover his origin, by extension himself and by further extension his people in this depressing dialogue is rebuffed by his mother. She sees his probing attempts as threatening, not only because it seeks to know the painfully unknown and tries to question the status quo, but also because her history like that of the West Indies replete with accounts of invasion, oppression, slavery, betrayals and emasculation have been consciously or otherwise distorted and effectively buried by the collective historical experience of colonialism. Little wonder Boy G. concludes this sad line of conversation with these words:

My birth began with an almost total absence of family relations. My parents on almost all sides had been deposited in the bad or uncertain accounts of all my future relationships, and loneliness ...was the legacy with which my first year opened. (4)

The narrator's sense of loss and loneliness is typified in the debilitation that accompanies the rain and the formidable wall of discouragement he encounters in his mother. His history past is blurred and having no real memory to recollect or a sense of the past, he can only react like a rootless man - having little or nothing from which to evolve and develop a consciousness. Even then, he is clearly profoundly affected by the fall outs from these historical realities.

Conclusion: From our explorations so far, we observed that in the novel *In the Castle of My Skin*, colonialism had a most debilitating effect on the colonized as the colonialists' strategy and mechanism for repression through historical distortions, social indoctrination and economic extortion is still in place, even after a few of these Caribbean islands have become independent. Indeed, with the attainment of independence status by some of these Caribbean islands, the tool for oppression and extortion are soon dismantled. The emotional climate changes and with the reality of their poor and near hopeless socio-economic existence, exile through migration to Britain became the only available option to the West Indians. The collapse of the hastily put together and fragile West Indian Federation in 1962 further exacerbated an already bad situation and a mass exodus from 'Little' into 'Big' England became the only saving grace for a highly disillusioned and impoverished people. The above being the case therefore, we can tentatively submit that Lamming's second novel *The Emigrants* builds up "events and impressions around a situation existing in (historical) time, rather than around a person or a closely related group of people" (Moore 1961) who have been battered and brutalized by tag team of slavery and colonialism.

As a people, very few West Indians really accept their island societies as home, while the harsh realities of colonial paternalism and a jaundiced educational system ensure that they now see England as home. As a writer, George Lamming has always seen exile as a palliative of sort to the West Indian debacle of seeking stability, focus and direction in life. Indeed, for a while his battle cry is "to be an exile is to be alive" (*Lamming 2005*) because he was the Boy G (Boy George?) in *In the Castle of My Skin* who fled the clutches and backlashes of colonialism into exile at the close of the novel. Indeed, the effects of colonialism on both the colonized and the colonizers are still being felt by the descendants of the original actors in the Caribbean context.

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