

## Exploring Landscape: A comparative Study of George Lamming's *In the Castle of My skin* and *Water with Berries*

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### Abstract

*George Lamming is a leading voice in the Caribbean literary tradition and has made an important contribution to forging West Indian Identity. His preoccupations were defined and honed in the context of the anti-colonial movement of the 1950's, which shaped his later works. Though Water With Berries(1971) was published in a different context, it extends the themes revolving around liberty and identity developed in his earlier work, In the Castle of My Skin (1953).*

*The present paper investigates the way the representation of landscape has a symbolic role in the narratives. While Lamming's sensitiveness to West Indian landscape in The castle of My skin reveals the way landscape is tarnished by colonialism, In Water With Berries it is related to the theme of exile and the quest for identity. However different the treatment is, the study of Landscape in both novels allows us to understand even better the way the representation of landscape can be a tool of resistance and a way to reclaim a distinct cultural identity.*

**Keywords:** landscape, space, resistance, domination, liberation

In each of the works under study, the representation of domination is tightly linked with that of liberation. The ideas of domination and liberation evolve around the concept of

land and the contest over territory. As Edward Said contends, space has a double function: a topographical and a symbolic one. Landscape is the site around which resistance is carried out. Literature is engaged, through the representation of space, in “Cartographic resistance” which refers to the struggle over geography/land. The struggle is not only over naming and possessing land but also over representation, a contest over images. The novel is engaged, at the level of imagination, in producing a new vision of space free from the imperialist framework. As Said puts it: “geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored. Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through imagination” (1994: 270)

Hence, the representation of landscape is concurrently an attempt to delineate and reclaim landscapes that have been mangled, reshaped, distorted and moulded according to the needs of the colonial system. This very minutely depicted landscape turns into the site of contestation and conflict. In *the Castle of My Skin*, George Lamming shows a great sensitiveness to the West Indian landscape by recreating “the sights, sounds and even odors of his native Barbados” and celebrating the community (Gliks, 1981: 123). Indeed, landscape has a functional role in the narrative and a symbolic dimension.

The novel opens with the image of a flooded village. Rain is depicted as a curse “evoking the image of those legendary waters which had once arisen to set a curse on the course of man” (10). The villagers’ sense of displacement and separateness from the setting is foreshadowed, right from the opening pages of the novel. The fact that the “flood had chosen to follow [G] in the celebration of all [his] years” is an indication of the perpetual doom of the villagers. They are condemned to never ending wreckage as they cling to the status quo ante and are unwilling to accept or welcome any possibility of change.

The rootlessness of the inhabitants of Creighton village is suggested through the image of wrecked houses. The image of the Fosters’ washed away, taking Mr. Foster with it, assumes consequence as an image of the doomed pattern of the villagers’ life. The flood not only mirrors the wreckage of the village but also the villagers’ sense of despondency, dislocation and non-control over their fate. Just as the village physical contour completely alters and loses its shape and identity in the seasonal period of the flood, so does character G, the novel’s

protagonist, live in a state, devoid of any identity. The physical wreckage of the village parallels his overwhelming sense of loss, loneliness and alienation linked with the image of the absent father. The spatial elements, described in terms of desolation and wreck, are a reminder of his sense of partiality and lack of a past which can hold a sway over him.

As G is a central figure “whose personal experience crystallises that of the entire community”, the bull-horned phantoms that he wrestles with and seems unable to chase can be equated with the different forces that the community struggles with, in the aftermath of colonisation(Pouchet, 1983: 14). Indeed, they denote the colonial legacy of the past which hinges over the villagers’ present denying them any unity with their own landscape. The joint “unfeeling figure of the demon” and the “fog of blackness that covered the land” (14), two recurring images in the novel, set the scene of desolation and foreshadow the sense of fissure between the inhabitants of Creighton village and their surroundings due to the incisive effects of colonisation.

The description of the village brings to the fore the colonial experience and the travails of the British Empire to subdue land. The act of naming Barbados as “Little England” is indicative of the usurpation of space. Creighton village has undergone the same process. Indeed, its outer space has been usurped and moulded, giving shape to a place cut into two parts, with clearly delimited boundaries.As Fanon contends, the compartmentalisation of landscape is one of the ways through which the colonial forces delimit the social order and consolidate difference (1965: 5). It is a way to set both geographic and mental boundaries whereby difference is consolidated.

The fences, the wood and the high wall act as a shield against the intrusion of the villagers. They symbolise the aura of superiority and grandeur surrounding the spot of the land inhabited by the white landlords. The figure of the landlord inhabiting a sort of “palace”, surrounded by fences and towers, keeping a dominant hold on the bordering lands, is a typical feudal figure. The landlord’s house can be seen from any point of the village though hidden by trees, acting as an icon of domination reminding the village of the yoke that ties them to the white landlord:

The terms used to describe the geographical locations of the white landlord's house and the villagers' reveal a clear cut dichotomy. The distance between the white landlord's "brick house hoisted on the hill" (25) and the villagers' houses, in the wrecked part, is reminiscent of a clear cut dichotomised structure where the physical traits reveal the forces of domination. This dichotomised structure is conveyed through the representation of the village as one divided into two parts - Creighton and Belleville.

The discrepancy between the world of whites and that of the villagers is made explicit though the boys' perception of both places in opposite terms. Creighton is portrayed as "a marvel of small, heaped houses raised jauntily on groundsels of limestone, and arranged in rows on either side of the multiplying marl roads" (10). On the contrary, Belleville is seen as "a palace" which "was like what [they] called the other world" where "the houses were all bungalows high and wide with open galleries and porticoes" (109).

The representation of landscape underlines a strong parallel between the effects of colonisation on both the colonised and the West Indian space. The description of the village in negative terms suggests the forlornness of the space and the "intoxication of nothingness" which permeates the villagers' existence (33). This is clear in the perception of the spatial elements as insipid and sluggish: "The sky, trees, wind, clouds [...] were now remote and inactive [...] The sun bleeding its light over the land seemed to hang over the sky as though it were a foreign and unwanted body. The trees [were] upright, steady, and stupid and the houses [...] neutral and resigned [...] old, weary and remote (159).

The diction the narrator uses to describe the native space signals its symbolic dimension. Landscape is portrayed as a persona. The detachment of the sun, for instance, from the space reminds the reader of the dissociation of the villagers from their surroundings. The remoteness and inactivity of the above spatial elements echo the passivity and aloofness of the villagers. Similarly, the resignation and neutrality of the houses call to mind the villagers' acquiescence of and submission to colonial power.

Lanning uses a clear cut binary opposition of coloniser and colonised to describe the manoeuvres of the British Empire and its endeavour to mould landscape. The treatment of the West Indian landscape underscores how the relation between the natives and their

landscape is tinged with a fissure created by the colonial experience. As the novel zooms over a rural community where land holds a particular value, landscape is turned into a site of contest and conflict over land. Indeed, it is around land that the events evolve as it is at the centre of the villagers' lives and yet the object of all the trouble in the village. It is both the symbol of roots and the object of coveting and greed, an instiller of hatred, despair, resignation and resentment. As Gilkes puts it: "land is a necessary but treacherous possession. Village life is rooted in the land, but it is a land frequently washed away by flood, the object of human greed as well as devotion, a land which is finally sold from under the villagers by Black speculators risen from their own ranks".(1981: 125)

Landscape in *The Castle of My Skin* is portrayed as the locus of domination and dispossession, revealing the villagers' unawareness of their entanglement in a new power structure. They fail to discern that the members of the rising middle class, new owners of their spots of land, represent another form of bondage. The village is moving from a feudal system into a capitalist mode of exploitation characterised by the flow of money and the creation of the Penny Bank. Under this new capitalist system, the old values disintegrate, giving way to different values based on profit-making and accumulation of wealth. Land is no longer the core of the villagers' life but the object of greed, a mere commodity.

The middle class, the new rising bourgeoisie, forms the novel figure of exploitation. It becomes the shadow of the white occupants and the heir of the old system of exploitation. These new forms of domination lead to the dispossession of the peasants by stealing from them of the land they used to occupy. The middle class's impulse for ascendancy is conveyed through the figure of Mr. Slime whose actions reveal his desire to shift from the subject position of a simple fifth-form teacher to a ruler. His character is marked by duplicity; he presents himself convincingly as a redeemer of the villagers as he promises them land ownership, and for many he becomes "another Moses" (to use old Pa's words) who has "come to save his people" (78). Ironically, he proves to be neither their redeemer nor their saviour but rather a mere deceiver concerned with serving his own interests.

Through the dynamic relationship between the peasants and the middle class, the novel can be read as the story of a Barbadian community moving from one stage of

domination into a newer phase of exploitation. The novel then spans not only the colonial period but also the last phase of colonialism and the transition to a neo-colonial mode of existence marked by power-shifts and a continuum of dominance under a new political regime that somehow manages to retain many of the vestiges of the old system.

Through an analysis of the class dynamics at work in the society, Lamming brings to the fore the resilient attitude of the inhabitants of Creighton Village even as he reveals the extent to which the villagers are unaware of structural changes that are taking place around them. In *Water with Berries*, Lamming explores the same theme and gives it a new dimension as the novel is set in the post - independence era.

*In the Castle of My Skin* ends with the decision of character G to migrate to Trinidad to pursue his studies. This marks the beginning of a new migratory pattern which many West Indians follow as a new path to discover new horizons and understand their identity. Although G's migration to another island within the region does not follow the same migratory pattern, it is prompted by the need to find affirmation and 'progress' elsewhere. It has the same impact on his understanding of home and self. The theme of departure as a means to end novels is one that is repeated in the West Indian novels of the period.

*Water with Berries* examines the migration experience of three artists coming from different regions of the Caribbean. Their 'journey out' is in one sense an extension of G's experience, but it goes further by exploring migration to the "Mother Country", and in so doing this theme of migration provides a framework with which to analyse the relation between the former coloniser and colonised experiences of the village"

The action is set in London, the Heart of the Beast. The world of the former coloniser is hence the framework in which the narrative evolves. Much of the action does not take place in open spaces but in the closed and confined spaces of the room and the house and the Mona bar (Szeman, 1998: 192). Indeed, the setting is different from that of the plantation world and the realm of the yard that Lamming explored in his earlier work.

Lamming chooses London as the setting of his novel to explore the colonial relationship between the descendants of Prospero and Caliban, a theme he draws from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The novel is the story of three artists who, for different reasons,

fled their native countries and sought refuge in London. Their escape is motivated by a desire for liberation from the burden of their pasts. However, winning a place in the space of the other and hence claiming it theirs has proved to be a futile act. London has soon turned into an alien space where their sense of isolation and submission to the dominant order has become more acute.

Contrary to *In the Castle of My Skin* where the treatment of West Indian landscape aims at exploring the repercussions of the imperial enterprise on land and the contest over territory, *Water with Berries* attributes a psychological and symbolic dimension to space. Indeed, space has the mere functional aim of exploring the psychic relationship of dominance and dependence the exiles are caught in, though literally free from the shackles of colonisation.

The novel opens with the description of the climate of a typical day in September. The first sentence “the fog was breaking up” sets the scene where the events are to take place and plunges us in the heart of the London landscape. Yet, the description of the climate has another function as it suggests a sense of a seeming harmony between Teeton, the novel’s protagonist, and his surroundings. Indeed, “after seven years he had learnt to live with the lunacy of the seasons” and “had never felt any panic amidst their mob; no gales had yet come to tear his skin away” (11). However, this idea is quickly countered by his desire to return after seven years of exile in London: “He had been growing without much notice from anyone; *a plant* which had defied some foreign soil; coming to fruition without a name... After seven years it was now over” (11).

This introduces a key motif in the novel, that of the dialectics of departure and return. Teeton’s urgent need to return embodies his change of attitude to, and perception of, the space he sought to claim as his own through emigration. Teeton succeeds in appropriating, and melting in, a space he has unconsciously sought to conquer. The comparison between Teeton and the plant highlights the idea that London is the space of accomplishment and growth. Yet, the price to pay is “the growth without a name”, the total effacing of one’s true sense of self. Like a plant uprooted from its soil and transplanted in a foreign soil, he has been able to move forward and build his career as an artist. His growth goes hand in hand

with a sense of obliteration. London no longer symbolises a haven or a site of liberation but a space of entanglement.

Teeton's desire to return to San Cristobal, his native island, incarnates a latent wish to embrace and repossess a lost space. The search for roots that takes place in an alien landscape is a prerequisite for the repossession of the landscape of his origins. What first occurs at the level of imagination under the form of a nostalgic yearning for the soil and landscape of his childhood may materialise in an actual return. It is in this sense that London becomes a threshold for claiming one's landscape, a "harbour for this kind of waiting" (11), to come to grips with one's sense of self and place and to liberate himself from the domination to which he is subjected.

The representation of the space inhabited by Teeton foregrounds this double feeling of liberation and domination. The room constitutes a space he creates for himself, a refuge and a shelter. He wants it to be "a home" that is "cosy as a cave when he wanted to be in hiding" (14). He models it according to his needs and taste, develops a close relationship to it and reacts to it as "a farmer alerting himself to the needs of his livestock" (11). Yet, this space paradoxically reinforces his ties with his native island.

It is a space through which Teeton seems to keep a sound link with the past he left behind when he made up his mind to 'desert' his native island, as he himself puts it. The room which is supposed to be void of "any trace of fuss" bears ironically the legacy and anxieties of his past. The description and listing of the objects it includes are very evocative. Indeed, the emptiness of the room is a marker of the void of his present:

"Two windows and one door.

A pair of chairs at opposite ends of the table.

Twin divans that stretched the whole length of the wall.

There was a white plaster head of Columbus on the mantelpiece.

A black tree trunk rose from the far corner.

The folding maps were his only curtains.

He loved his room. Spare, solitary, without any trace of fuss. It was beyond improvement" (11-12).



The “white plaster head of Columbus”, the map and the tree trunk are not mere objects but have a symbolic function. The White plaster, for instance, hints at the discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus in 1492, which marked the beginning of a whole history of alienation and slavery in the Caribbean. Indeed, the plaster bears the scars of the past from which Teeton sought to escape seven years ago. The maps are an ornamental element of his room. Hung as a substitute for curtains, they are a constant reminder of his topographical belonging to another landscape, another place. The maps are a means through which he keeps an eye on the island which lulled his childhood. It is an emblem of his sense of entrapment and inability to fuse in the space he has carved for himself in London. It is very telling that whenever he feels the impulse to return to his native island, he looks at the map as though he was looking for reassurance. The deliberate choice to furnish his room with maps discloses his sense of insecurity in that space and his need for a safety measure that keeps reminding him of his roots. He lives under the smiling gaze of the island totally enmeshed into it and subjected to its demanding gaze of return.

It is through the maps that Teeton seeks to soothe his deep sense of guilt at having left the island. The maps are an outlet for driving out the atrocity of what he describes as an act of “desertion”, a word that resonates incessantly in the depth of his mind for even “after seven years he could still hear that martyrdom screaming in his ears” (18). It is in keeping his memory intact and alive that he transforms the former image he has of the island and weaves a positive and revolutionary one. The island, as he envisions it, is no longer the humiliated entity bowing to dominant forces but one “erratic with rage”. It is triumphing over natural disasters, rising autonomously and breaking out of a whole history of submission and subordination: “The maps were coming to his aid. Now the island rose in a blaze of morning [...] Now this name San Cristobal had become a warning everywhere[...] the island was there erratic with rage; pugnacious as its legendary fighting cocks”(18-19).

The black tree trunk is the third and most important element of his room. Like the other two elements, it is indicative of his attempt to fashion his space. It can be read as an elaboration of the comparison set early in the narrative between Teeton and the plant transplanted in a foreign soil. It intensifies his sense of deracination and reiterates his past of

dislocation incurred by the experience of colonisation. His hidden intention “to return the tree trunk to the garden” parallels his desire to return and may be indicative of his awareness that the space he carved for himself does not constitute the place where he actually belongs. Just like the tree trunk which, though not “a harmless addition” but an integral element in this room, should belong to the garden and nowhere else, he is part of the new space he fashioned for himself, yet, he is not totally part of it for he belongs somewhere else. He is not totally free in that space but dominated by the Old Dowager.

On the other hand, the tree trunk acts as a double symbol of uprootedness and of the game of contest over territory between the former coloniser and the colonised. It is a game that is still going on though the colonial experience is over. The tree trunk becomes a surrogate object of battle and contest. It stands for the exile’s battle to forge a space of manoeuvre in an alien space. The dead tree trunk which he brings into his room is a symbol of both his status in the Old Dowager’s house and his condition as an exile in foreign space (Da Silva: 2000, 161). Thus, the act of “salvage[ing] it from the back of the garden more than a year ago” is, to my mind, an act of retrieval, an attempt on the part of Teeton to recuperate a natural element which is not his but the Old Dowager’s. It is a gesture that reveals his desire for autonomy and liberation from the domination which permeates every aspect of his room.

The room is depicted as the locus of spatial domination and entrapment. It turns to be not an intimate space where he can give free reign to his imagination but a space constantly intruded by the Old Dowager, his landlady. Nothing brings the point home better than the following description: “He watched her and wondered what miracle of affection had turned this room into a home... It could be like a fortress in the morning: harsh and cold with neglect until the Old Dowager came in and took it over. Soon it would be converted by her hands to its more normal state: a mixture of workshop, playground and garden. (14).

The use of the term “take over” gives the room another symbolic dimension. It becomes a joint site over which both tenant and landlord compete. The room is altered by the Old Dowager’s touch into a playing field for their game of deception which is respectively hidden under the guise of compliance and mothering. The Old Dowager’s perpetration of

this ritual betrays her love of possession and her sense of domination. Indeed, the nurturing attitude she adopts reflects her inability to give in her space. The seeming act of care and nurturing is actually an act of dominance. The traces she leaves bear her presence and her grip over Teeton's physical space and his psychological consciousness. As S. Da Silva points out: "Within the novel's symbolic framework, Teeton's room [...] becomes the constraining space [...] Once a place of welcome, relief from the hostility of a cold and inhospitable land, the room that Teeton occupies in the Old Dowager's house becomes the prison from which there is no escape" (2000; 161).

Furthermore, Teeton's sense of entrapment and his subjection to her control is mirrored in the entanglement of both room and house. The room is part and parcel of the house. As such, it becomes a symbol of the yoke that binds him to the Old Dowager. The room is ironically not a room of his own but a marker of his alienation and isolation: a space that he sought to possess and comprehend but which failed his expectations: "The house was the Old dowager's; but the room was his; and house and room were in some way their joint creation; some unspoken partnership in interests they had never spoken about [...] But it was time to go" (14).

Teeton acquires the consciousness that he cannot live forever in this foreign space. He becomes conscious of his sense of uprootedness and of his need to reconcile with his land, soil, and past. Just like a plant in a foreign soil which is doomed to wither out because its seeds and roots are somewhere else, so is Teeton outside his natural element; he can never feel that sense of whole liberation. It is this sense of partiality, loss of one's sense of place and entanglement into the domination of the other that Lamming tries to tease out in *Water with Berries* through the experience of exile in London.

Like *In the Castle of My Skin*, *Water with Berries* brings to the fore the issue of domination and liberation. But it is the colonisation of the mind that Lamming spells out through the representation and perception of the city. The revolutionary impulse is conveyed through the representation of place and the way he engages landscape. Engaging with landscape is, in both narratives, a terrain on which the discourse of liberation is articulated. While *In the Castle of My Skin* delineates the colonial process of reshaping and distorting the

physical space, *Water with Berries* is concerned with divulging the process of mental and psychic domination. It is in this sense that both novels form a continuum and embrace the same revolutionary ideology, revealing the intrinsic link between domination and liberation.

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