



George Lamming's "The Occasion for Speaking" – A Postcolonial discourse

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Abstract— George Lamming is an ardent West Indian writer who has authored about six novels and numerous texts of non-fiction. His debut novel, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) became a highly popular critically acclaimed novel in the post-colonial literature. Lamming plays a crucial role in the positioning of the West-Indian writers in English literature. His astoundingly brilliant and widely controversial collection of essays, *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) features the post-colonial issues faced by the West-Indians including migration, exile, identity crisis, hunger for recognition and the mixed cultural affiliations exhibited by the post-colonies. This paper tries to trace the postcolonial traits in Lamming's essay, *The Occasion for Speaking* and thus, acquire a refined understanding of the thoughts and ideals of the colonized West-Indian who is in exile.

Keywords—Post-colonial, migration, exile, identity, recognition.

INTRODUCTION

"The pleasure and paradox of my own exile is that I belong wherever I am."

Lamming (50)

George Lamming, the Barbadian novelist and essayist, has attempted to define the place of the West Indian in the post-colonial world in his collection of essays, *The Pleasures of Exile*. With a nationalistic spirit and poetic prose style, Lamming has established himself as a popular postcolonial writer. He exposes the Eurocentric views and myths embedded in the minds of the colonized. He tries to explain the physical, cultural, psychological and intellectual responses of the West Indians to colonization. He beautifully blends the politics of migration and cultural hybridity to his essays.

Post-colonial discourse:

"Postcolonial discourse is the discourse of the colonized and the oppressed."

Yashoda

Postcolonial literature is the literature without borders and the emigrant writers are the major contributors to the post-colonial literature. They either write about their

country of origin (colonies) or the country to which they have migrated (colonizers). While one group of these expatriate writers assimilate and acclimatize to the foreign country, the other section is unable to overcome the difference and is caught in the middle. George Lamming, an emigrant writer from Barbados and settled in Britain, is someone who has employed his experience and expertise to voice out the plight of the West Indians.

These emigrant writers are well aware of the differences between the two lands and use these differences and discriminations to substantiate their perspectives. One such eminent postcolonial writer is Derek Walcott. In his work, *What the twilight says*, he portrays the contradiction evident between the Caribbean twilight and the British twilight. He uses the 'twilight' metaphor to highlight the consequences of colonization.

We could trace the experience of Lamming through migration to Britain in his autobiographical novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*. The novel explores and exposes the plight that the West Indians had to undergo when the British left them. It also shows the chaos and unrest that prevailed in the country. Lamming says that,

“...the colonial experience of my generation was almost wholly without violence. It was a terror of the mind...”

Postcolonial traits in “The Occasion for Speaking”:

“The exile is a universal figure...(24)”

Lamming puts forward various questions regarding the cause of the exile of the postcolonial writers. He identifies that these writers feel insecure and they might yearn for recognition from the native English speakers. He establishes that the majority of people in the colonies are illiterate and not politically active. Perhaps this is the reason why writers migrate to Britain. He has the perception that, “To be an exile is to be alive(24).”

However, Lamming is also equally aware of the Eurocentric perceptions that have shaped the culture, society and the psyche of the West Indians. He says that the seed of colonization has paved way to various myths and misconceptions which are very hard to unlearn or change. This, he says, is because the colonizers are regarded for their ‘intellectual authority’ and colonial supremacy, with their whole education system being borrowed from the colonizers. He says that,

“For what I am emphasizing is the inherited feeling of difference which is his privilege and my source of discomfort.(75)”

Lamming predicts that, the West Indies would initially face chaos in the absence of the colonizers. However, he gains hope from works that the West Indian novelists have brought in. He is aware that the West Indian novelists have contributed to the creation of their own identity through the language of the colonizers. They exhibit the peasant rhythm to their novels which paves way to the growth of West Indian novel reading. This will indeed increase the nationalism of the West Indians. These novels with the organic touch of their native land and with the grooming of the colonizers’ language, is what gives their identity.

The Indian-born British writer, Salman Rushdie states that the migrant is placed in the position of having to choose an identity for himself. He says that the out-of-country loss of the migrant will enable him to speak concretely on a subject of universal appeal.

“...migration is not so much a mere interval between fixed point of departure and arrival, but a mode of being...for those who come from elsewhere and cannot go back, perhaps writing becomes a place to live” (King 1995:xv)

CONCLUSION

“Our duty is to find ways of changing the root and perspectives of the background, of dismantling the accumulated myth, both cultural and political, which an inherited and uncritical way of seeing has now reinforced. And our biggest weapon, our greatest and safest chance lies on education: among the young.(30)”

George Lamming shows how the colonizers still exercise cultural authority over the post-colonies in various ways. He explores how this has an impact on the post-colonial writing. He also talks about the effects of migration and exile; and how they influence the identity of these post-colonial writers. Therefore, it could be concluded that the post-colonial traits are prevalent and evident in George Lamming’s *The Occasion for Speaking*.

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