Outside the Eyes of the Other: George Lamming and Definition in "Of Age and Innocence"
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The subject of Caribbean definition has occupied and engaged almost every writer of the Caribbean region. This is natural because in so many respects writing is a form of self-definition within a certain defined society and culture. Writers write from experiences within particular societies, and their work necessarily defines both the experience and the society. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o has noted in Homecoming, commenting on the relationship between a writer and his society:

A writer responds with his total personality, to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensitive needle, he registers, with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society.... For the writer himself lives in, and is shaped by, history. (47)

Thus, a writer defines his society through his portrayal of experiences within it. At the same time, the experiences of the society shape his writing. It is in both these senses that writing becomes a process of defining.

To define is to characterize, to describe the nature of something, making it clear, stating precisely its meaning, making it become more vivid. But defining the Caribbean in such terms has been particularly problematic for the writer in the Caribbean. This is because the problems of definition have to do with the problems of a broken history and a discontinuity in culture.
The history of the Caribbean has been perpetually marked by displacement, the after-effects of conquest, slavery, and colonialism. European conquest of the region resulted in the decimation of the aboriginal population in most areas of the region, thus hindering historical and cultural continuity. The uprooting and importation of African slaves to toil in plantations, the introduction of Indian indentured laborers to replace African slaves after the abolition of slavery, as well as the presence of European settlers led to the creation of a society of immigrants, all with broken cultures and history. This then resulted in what is commonly referred to as the “melting pot” situation that brought people of myriad cultural and linguistic backgrounds together without the real cohesion what could unify them: people who, as Naipaul’s protagonist says in The Mimic Men, “would have found fulfilment in the landscapes hemmed by their ancestors.” The lack of relationship with past and landscape estranged peoples of the region from their ancestral pasts and cultures, robbing them of mythology, tradition, and a sense of origin.

In nineteenth-century historical writings this condition gave rise to the idea of the Caribbean championed by Froude and Trollope which saw the region as a no man’s land where people lacked a common purpose and identity. “There are no people there in the true sense of the word with a character and a purpose of their own,” the British historian Anthony Froude said in 1888 (306). Impressions like Froude’s presented a negative view of the region, denying it a character and a sense of achievement. In twentieth-century historical writing, this idea of Caribbean definition is still problematic, giving rise to diverse interpretations even among historians. An historian such as M. G. Smith, for instance, championed the idea of a plural society in the region, whereas in his book The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, the historian Edward Brathwaite identified a certain cohesion in the creolizing processes in the region.

In the literature of the Caribbean, the subject of definition has been equally problematic. V. S. Naipaul echoes Eurocentric historians when he asserts that “history is built around achievement and creation, and nothing was created in the West Indies” (Middle Passage 29). His view gives a desolate impression of the West Indies as a derelict and uncreative place. Such a view of the region, determined by historical circumstances and largely advanced by the vision of outsiders, is what most West Indian writers struggle to counteract as they strive to create new and alternative interpretations of the region’s past and its peoples.

Lamming, like most Caribbean artists, confronts this negative definition of the region and attempts through the imaginative possibilities offered by the novel to explore new visions and meanings of experience in the Caribbean. From a close study of the content and form of Lamming’s novels as they have developed through his career, it is easy to see how the novelist interprets and invests new meaning in human experience in the region. In Lamming’s view, the Caribbean artist is compelled to move beyond the confines of history and experience, to explore new alternatives and possible
meanings even in a history of displacement, slavery, and subjugation. He asserts that:

... the mystery of the colonial is this: while he remains alive, his instinct, always and forever creative, must choose a way to change the meaning and perspective of this ancient tyranny. (*Pleasures* 229)

For Lamming, this ancient tyranny is the whole colonial structure of awareness which is the self-perception and personality created by the colonial experience. All Lamming's novels are preoccupied with the dramatization of this colonial structure of awareness while at the same time they explore new and counteracting interpretations of these experiences, enabling the Caribbean to transcend the history of subjugation and displacement. In so doing, Lamming lays bare the psychological damage and the cultural and economic dependence while also exploring new ways of overcoming these barriers.

In exploring the damaged psychology of the colonial, Lamming dramatizes how the personal lives of his individual characters reveal their frustrations, inadequacies, and feelings of abandonment. But at the same time he shows how his characters can overcome such feelings. Furthermore, Lamming also explores new ways of changing the relationships between the colonizer and the colonized by creating new levels of understanding which will liberate them. This preoccupation is what I would call Lamming’s “way of seeing,” his vision as delineated in his literary and creative explorations.

It is within this very broad and general background that this essay will explicate the nature of definition in Lamming's *Of Age and Innocence*. In this novel, Lamming seems to explore with more intensity and complexity the political drama that had been initiated in his first novel *In The Castle of My Skin* but which, however, was never fulfilled; the participants had not transcended their personal history and colonial relations. It appears that Lamming is still grappling with the nature of political freedom and its implications for Caribbean definition. At the same time he is also re-exploring those possibilities of exile which he had initiated through Trumper in *In The Castle of My Skin* and relentlessly explored in his second novel, *The Emigrants*. *Of Age and Innocence* also dramatizes the role of the returning emigrants in the struggle for political freedom. Thus, presumably, the emigrants in *Of Age and Innocence* can be assumed to be the very same emigrants who had left the Caribbean island in search of a better break and fulfillment in *The Emigrants* and now seem to be returning home with new visions and sensibilities but are nevertheless still alienated.

It can be argued that after their failure to make a better break and their inability to enter mainstream English society, the emigrants, symbolized by Shephard and Mark, return home, intending to redefine themselves through political action. The returning emigrants believe very strongly that through political action they will achieve political freedom, which will eventually offer possibilities for new definitions. Shephard, the returning emigrant in *Of Age and Innocence* who subsequently becomes the leader of the political movement, explains his relation to politics in these terms:
‘It is truer to say I went into politics in order to redefine myself through action. And just as it was a certain deception which preceded a certain understanding, it would seem that a certain regression is necessary for any leap I may make, for any other me to emerge.’ (204)

After the bitter discovery that England (like the white woman who deceived him) was not part of his reality, Shephard decided to return home to San Cristobal, realizing now that San Cristobal, not England, was his promised land. As he declares to the other passengers in the plane:

‘I know San Cristobal. It is mine, me... all its separate parts. No new country, but an old land inhabiting new forms of men who can never resurrect their roots and do not know their nature. Colour in their old and only alphabet. The whites are turning whiter, and the blacks are like instinct which some voice, my voice, shall exercise. San Cristobal, so old and so new, no place, this land, but a promise. My promise, and perhaps yours too...’ (58)

The experience of exile in England, though it disillusioned and crushed the immigrants, gave them a new insight, a new appreciation and identity with their island. It seems that for Lamming, emigration is on one level a form of self-exploration, a process of re-assessing and evaluating one’s identity, as well as a process of self-knowledge which the emigrants must acquire in order to overcome the colonial syndrome that makes them hanker after other landscapes. The detachment and self-searching afforded by emigration enable them to have a better perception of themselves as well as their landscapes, and as an experience, it provides them with a certain impetus and drive for political action. Shephard seems aware of this possibility when he confesses to Penelope:

‘You may not be of a turn of mind to understand my feelings. This is private, and perhaps, I have given the matter an unnatural attention. That is what you will say. But I could never escape, and I do not see how you can call such an awareness my fault. This is the truth. Of all the senses which serve our knowledge of those around us it is the eye which I could not encounter in peace. It is as though my body defined all of me, and then played the role of traitor for those who watched. So that the eye of the other became for me a kind of public prosecutor. I felt surrounded by a perpetual act of prosecution. I was judged finally by the evidence which my body, a kind of professional spy, always offered. And there are times when I have felt my presence utterly burnt up by the glance which another had given me. I wanted to disappear or die. I don’t think I have always had this feeling, but I was aware of it for the first time in England, and then a certain relationship helped to put it beyond my control... It became an obsession which possessed me completely...’ (112-13)

Shephard’s experience in England as an emigrant for the first time made him realize that the eye of the “Other,” the colonizer, defined him because of his color; that his skin became the sole determinant of his existence, preventing him from entering mainstream English society. There is a double-edged perception of exile here. On the one hand, it creates negative
sentiments in the colonial, but on the other, it is a spur to political action. The colonial, forced by exclusion and irrelevancy to reassess himself, is spurred to action. This is vividly portrayed in Penelope’s insight into the difference between her condition and Shephard’s:

But she wanted to let him know that those he called the enemy were equally torn by a similar contradiction which made him a hero in San Cristobal. There was only this difference, she thought: his enemy was without the energy which had urged him to seek some release in action. They could not recapture this turbulent peace which would always haunt his life with anguish and promises of reward. (206)

Penelope can do nothing to change her condition, whereas at least Shephard can be stirred into politics as a release and means of definition. Thus in the end it is the colonizer’s attitude towards him that propels Shephard into political action in order to define himself outside the colonizer’s eyes. He envisages the struggle for political freedom as leading inevitably to a new identity, which in turn will offer a new political vision to the whole island.

As a leader of the political movement, Shephard stands above the other leaders in the movement because of the self-knowledge he derives from exile. It is the same kind of knowledge evinced in Trumper in In The Castle of My Skin, a knowledge that provides both characters with a new way of seeing. For instance, that image of a chair, which Shephard aptly evokes, shows his level of political awareness as a result of his new knowledge:

‘Most people do not discover anything.... They learn things, or they hear about them, but that is different from seeing, really seeing something. I discovered that until then, until that experience, I had always lived in the shadow of a meaning which others had placed on my presence in the world...that meaning, like a chair which is wholly at the mercy of the idea guiding the hand of the man who builds it.’

...It is impossible for a chair to object to the way it is being made, to say I prefer to look like this...a chair could never object to being a chair.’

‘...Now take me. I am not a chair, but this meaning placed on my presence in the world possessed me in the same way that the idea of chair is from the start in complete possession of any chair, irrespective of its shape, size, usefulness. Any chair, is a chair. Similarly, the meaning I speak of had already made me for the other’s regard. A stupid me...any me you can think of always remained me. But like the chair, I have played no part at all in the making of that meaning which others use to define me completely.’ (203)

The colonial, according to Shephard, has never participated in the making of his definition because he has never had political freedom. This is what has consistently pushed him to live in the shadow of the “Other,” accepting other people’s definition of him. For Shephard that relationship wherein the colonial is seen as an object can only be reversed through political action. It is political action that will inevitably create a new order in which the colonial can define himself outside the colonizer’s values and definition of him. As he himself elaborately explains, he had attacked
Penelope in the plane because he had seen her as a symbol of that which had defined him without his consent. Now, through political action, he wanted to be seen as a subject rather than an object. As he points out to Penelope, “When I attacked you in the plane, I was attacking the meaning which had made me and to which I was exposed utterly by the woman who looked like you in every detail” (203). Indeed, Shephard believes that, through revolution in the form of political action, he will eventually change the meaning that has been bestowed on him by the colonizer:

‘Take the chair again. I begin by behaving like a chair. Now I have reached the stage of behaving like an extraordinary chair. I am like a chair which understands and which revolts by saying, fine I accept that I am a chair, for all practical purposes of human regard, I am a chair, but I shall behave on occasions as though I were not a chair. For example, I will only let you sit on me when I feel like it! Similarly, I accept me as the meaning I speak of has fashioned me. I accept. For all purposes of simple understanding, I agree that I am that me. But from now on, I deny that meaning its authority. When it suits my purpose, I shall use it, when it doesn’t, I shall be hostile. In fact, I am at war.... But neither the whites who get scared, nor the natives who are glad, quite know my real meaning. And the whites are terrified because I say that if I win power, and there is no doubt about that, I shall begin my business by changing the whole curriculum of privilege in San Cristobal.’ (204)

On the other hand, Shephard discovers that for political action to become a reality he must first accept the self that he has been made to reject, hate, and despise. For it is through accepting this submerged self that he can meaningfully re-define himself:

I am just a particular brand of man who, in certain circumstances which are old may remain with us for a long time, refuses to be that man. When I speak of regression I simply mean that my rebellion begins with an acceptance of the very thing I reject, because my conduct cannot have the meaning I want to give it, if it does not accept and live through that conception by which the others now regard it. What I may succeed in doing is changing the conception of me. But I cannot ignore it. (205)

It seems that through Shephard, Lamming suggests that political freedom should entail a deeper psychological adjustment than the mere “re-ordering and re-arrangement of the curriculum of privilege on the island.”

However, as Lamming demonstrates later on in the novel, Shephard’s political vision has certain loopholes. As an exile, his disillusion and detachment initiate introspection, self-assessment, and political action, but the very alienation which leads him into exile remains a disability which he must overcome. Lamming shows that as a leader of the political movement, Shephard exhibits a form of split personality because of the very alienation fostered by the exile. He is unable to transcend his personal history, and as Thief recognizes, “Tis like Shephard...something split a man right down the middle in two, an’ one half never make a meetin’ with the next” (393).
Because of this alienation, Shephard fails as a leader. For the same reason, his motive is clothed in selfishness, personal desires, and ambition. He participates in the political drama largely as a revenge against the deceptions and frustrations he encountered in England as an exile in the hands of a woman who deceived him. This is clearly dramatized through his character and actions in the plane as well as through the apt observation made by Ma Shephard:

He is not out of his head...but a new ambition hold in bondage, an’ all because o’ that England, an’ some woman who wear him out all night with the worry in his sleep. It is a war, it is a war he would like to purge his feelin’ with. An’ that is bad.... A man must clasp his feelin’ like a shirt, fit it right, an’ move on clean as the sun an’ in courage. (144)

Lamming seems to believe that political leaders as well as the collective folk must transcend their personal histories if they have to transform political action into real freedom. This view seems to explain the reason for his elimination of Shephard even when victory seemed so obvious and inevitable. Mark, the other returned exile in the novel, also suffers from a split personality which hinders his participation in the political movement. Like Shephard, Mark also fails to overcome the alienation that is the result of exile. As a result, he is unable to use the insights he acquires through his “backward glance” to recover his submerged self and history. His speech moves the crowd into drama, frenzy, and possession, but because of his personal fears, he fails to connect with the crowd and unite them in order to translate this insight into political action. In the end he remains alienated both on his island and in England. Indeed, as both Marcia and Bill observe, “He has lived away from San Cristobal for twenty years and he was never really at home in England” (46).

The failure of Mark and Shephard is therefore, in Lamming’s view, a problem of an alienation fostered in them by their situation of exile. In their political coalition and agenda, Singh, their Indian-descended colleague, also fails because, as a direct victim of colonialism, he does not transcend his personal history. Having suffered as a cane cutter on the sugar plantation, he reacts emotionally, exhibiting feelings of bitterness and hatred, not caring much about the future as long as there is a rearrangement of privileges when the political movement claims power.

Because the returned exiles fail as political leaders, the movement they lead does not achieve its goal. The leaders cannot inspire the collective folk to comprehend the real meaning of freedom and nationalism. Their response to politics is marked with drama, frenzy, religion, and possession, which apparently are not genuine manifestations of a mature political awareness. As Mark reminds them in his elaborate and moving speech, nationalism, the source of political struggle

‘...is not only frenzy and struggle with all its necessary demand for the destruction of those forces which condemn you to the status we call colonial. The national spirit is deeper and more enduring than that. It is original and necessary as the root to the body of the tree. It is the
source of discovery and creation. It is the private feeling you experience of possessing and being possessed by the whole landscape of the place where you were born, the freedom which helps you to recognise the rhythm of the winds, the scheme and aroma of the night...morn- ings arousing nature everywhere to the silent and sacred communica- tion between you and the roots you have made on this island. It is the bond between each man and that corner of the earth which his birth and his work have baptised with the name, home. And the freedom you sing...freedom...' (174-75)

For Lamming, nationalism is a prerequisite to political freedom because it gives the colonial an identity and definition that enable him to discard his desires and illusions for other landscapes.

Apart from the drama and frenzy which preponderously characterize the people’s response to politics, Lamming shows racial- and self-interest working against the possibility for political freedom. Because of his own greed and selfishness, Baboo, an Indian, kills Shephard so that Singh, a fellow Indian, could easily get the opportunity to lead San Cristobal. As he confesses later to Singh:

‘Was only for you, Singh, was only for you I do it...from infancy I dream to see someone like myself, some Indian with your achievement rule San Cristobal. My only mistake was to wish it for you Singh, was only for you I do what I do....’ (384)

In the end, the murder of Shephard totally changes the trend and pace of the political actions. Shephard’s death demoralizes the spirit and enthusiasm of the people. They feel frustrated, disillusioned, and cheated. The illusions and hopes that they had nurtured in the quest for political freedom are completely shattered; all the excitement and drama aroused by the political action come to an abrupt conclusion. The situation becomes tense as the society seems to drift back to the status quo.

It seems that Lamming dramatizes a political possibility which ends in failure. To counteract this failure, he explores a contrasting possibility in the political alliance created on a small scale by the youngsters. This alliance, both in personal relationships and commitment, becomes a foil to the larger alliance. The larger alliance failed because its leaders had not transcended their personal histories. All of them continue to harbor feelings of distrust, suspicion, and fear against each other because of their diverse racial back-grounds. In contrast, the boys of the secret society do not suffer from alien- ation but rather sincerely appreciate their land and its history. Indeed, it is the islands and myths which give them courage and enable them to tran- scend their personal histories. By upholding this attitude toward the land and its past, Lamming is showing that a sense of the past is of paramount importance for political freedom. In his descriptive account of San Cristo- bal, Lamming himself suggests a background that encompasses the percep- tion, appreciation, and appropriation of a past that is different from the colonizer’s and from which the colonial would draw inspiration and authen-ticity. The statues celebrating the colonial rulers as history makers are in fact
overshadowed by the legends and myths representing the island's history. Lamming shows that the island had a pre-colonial history, one that is embodied in Ma Shephard's oral history and in the rituals and legends of the island. In this view, the boys' genuine and total response to this aspect of the land is what saves them from the alienation of the grown-ups.

Thus the boys' secret society is Lamming's vision for the future, a future where there are possibilities for harmony, love, and trust and where political action cannot be stalled by alienation and personal crisis.

Lamming's exploration of political freedom as a means of self-definition greatly influences the form of *Of Age and Innocence*. The novel is structured to reflect the theme of political awareness and political action, and the plot develops with this theme. It shows how the growing political consciousness becomes yet another ritual in the island, marked by possession, religion, and frenzy.

As happens in *In The Castle of My Skin*, the structure of *Of Age and Innocence* attests to Lamming's conception of history as an active rather than a static phenomenon. The novel is structured in such a way that it presents "antagonistic opposition and contrasting situations" which become a challenge to the colonizer's history and at the same time offer possibilities for transcending the colonial situation. The contrasting visions of history and contrasting possibilities are used to move history towards a collective endeavor. Colonial history as manifested in the statues assumes that history began with the colonizers, but such implications are challenged by Ma Shephard, the repository of another history embodied in myths, legends, and rituals. The myths, legends, and rituals of the collective folk become a catalyst for the political action against the colonizer. Moreover they are also images of self-perception through which the people can see themselves against the colonizer. Through the use of oral tradition, Lamming celebrates that other version of history which is outside recorded history and which the status of the colonizer seems to deflate. The myth associated with the origin of the island gives the island a distinctive character and also marks the struggle for freedom. To enhance this kind of history, Lamming also employs the legend of "The Tribe Boys and the Bandit Kings" to show that there has always been a struggle for freedom and dignity on the island. Indeed, it is this very legend that inspired and invigorated Mark when he addressed the political rally. The legend is for him a form of a "backward glance," which unfortunately he does not utilize fully and transform into political action, à la Fola in *The Season of Adventure*:

> It was the legend of the Tribe Boys which had aroused the feeling which made the theme of his speech. He could hear his voice like the echo of the crowd pursuing him across the garden. Freedom and Death. He had spoken the language they understood. (179)

The legend of "The Tribe Boys and the Bandit Kings" becomes a form of shared experience for the collective folk. It is this same legend that spurred the boys of the secret society into action when the troops invaded the island.
In Of Age and Innocence, Lamming envisaged political freedom as a possibility for identity and definition. The search for political freedom fails not because such possibilities are exhausted, but simply because those involved in the drama fail to transcend their personal histories. Thus Lamming has made us change our way of seeing and made us see history as the collective experience of people. In this way, history becomes active and dynamic, rather than an account of cause and effect.

NOTES

1 This paper was part of a large work, entitled “Caribbean Definition: Its Effect on Form and Vision in George Lamming’s Novels,” presented at Kenyatta University in 1991.

2 “Backward glance” is a ritual, a form of recovery that can help colonials retrieve their submerged self and history. This process is well dramatized in Season of Adventure.

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