

# Mother Country, Father Country: "In the Castle of My Skin" and Oedipal Structures of Colonialism

MARY E. DONNELLY

There are close connections between the structure of the family and the structure of the nation. Militarization and the centralization of authority in a country automatically entail a resurgence of the authority of the father. In Europe and in every country characterized as civilized or civilizing, the family is a miniature of the nation.

FRANTZ FANON, *Black Skin, White Masks* (141-42)

THE STATE HAS long modelled its powers on a social structure that seems "natural": the traditional nuclear family.<sup>1</sup> In many cultures, men hold a cultural position that would be the envy of any ambitious politician. Filial responsibility transfers more or less seamlessly to social responsibility. In the colonial situation, however, obedience is required to a king far removed from the daily life of his subjects. In George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, the image of the king (as it appears on pennies) is a source of schoolboy speculation. I read this attempt to fix the image of the king as an attempt to fix the paradigm of the cultural father, far removed from the schoolboys' own daily lives. Their own culture, that of Barbados in the 1930s and 1940s, is continually devalued and effaced by the process of their education as British subjects. They are torn between the culture in which they live and the culture they are indoctrinated to believe is superior. On the one hand, they have the warm nurturing of the mother culture, a situation emphasized in this novel by the fact that the domestic experience of these young boys is overwhelmingly female. On the other, they have the trappings of the father culture, the British empire and especially the school, which offers them a way out of the poverty in which they were raised. Drawn in two

directions, the boys, and especially G., cannot have both. This tension places these children of colonialism in a bind not unlike that of a child facing the Oedipal conflict, forced to choose between comfort and law, the mother land or the father culture.

In using these terms, I am consciously refocusing traditional debate about colonialism. Although it is more typical to refer to the dominating culture, Great Britain in this case, as the Mother Country, I would like to rethink that usage, for if we consider the colonial child as torn between the mother and the father, we can see the mother only as Barbados, Barbadian culture, and the real Barbadian women who mother these (exclusively) male children. Like the father in Sigmund Freud's narrative of the nuclear family, British culture intervenes in the mother-child dyad, asserting its own laws and offering an opportunity for independence at the price of the maternal connection. Therefore I refer to Barbados as the mother culture or Mother Country and to Britain as the father culture or Father Country.

According to Freud, the infant is born into a state of oceanic oneness with the mother. This lack of differentiation represents a danger that feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin has called "the engulfing mother," a familiar cultural construct. The only path away from this frightening figure, who does not attempt to enforce any rule, is the "power of the liberator-father" (133) who demands compliance with his law. The infant, ruled by his uncontrolled id, must be taught to exert the self-control that comes with the development of the super-ego; he must be forced to internalize the values of the father, to identify with the father, and to repudiate the mother and all the dangers she represents.

This is hardly a neutral process, however. The son, for example, can never develop an affectionate relationship with his father; even in a best-case scenario, he can have only "an ambivalent attitude" towards him (Freud 32). The son identifies himself with his father, whom he perceives as powerful, but the father and son are separated by the father's power, and the son understands that the father has rights he cannot hope to attain:

[The super-ego's] relation to the ego is not exhausted by the precept: "You *ought to be* this (like your father)." It also comprises the prohibition: "You *may not be* like this (like your father)—that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative." (34)

Thus the father is made the ideal not just in a positive sense of behaviour modelling but also in the negative sense of restraint. He is both exemplar and enforcer. And it is in this latter role that we can see how the father comes to represent the outside world of social law.

The successful resolution of the Oedipal complex has somewhat more sinister implications for the mother and her relationship with her child. The mother must be rejected outright if the complex is to be concluded successfully for the child:<sup>2</sup>

The boy does not merely disidentify with the mother, he repudiates her and all her feminine attributes. The incipient split between mother as source of goodness and father as principle of individuation is hardened into a polarity in which her goodness is redefined as a seductive threat to autonomy. (Benjamin 135)

In this reading, all of the positive attributes of the mother become negative; she seeks to destroy her own child by smothering him in an attempt to keep him with her.

Traditional Freudian approaches, however, miss some of the real complexities of the Oedipal dynamic. The child does not actually choose between a mother who seeks to engulf him and a father who wants to set him adrift. The mother and the father have a relationship that does not include the child—they are allied to each other; and, because this relationship is hegemonic, the mother becomes the enforcer of the father's values, not an escape from them. In traditional family configurations this is not a reciprocal relationship. Benjamin points out that "the mother belongs to and acknowledges the father, but the father does not necessarily acknowledge her in return" (165). Laws move in one direction: from the top down.

As I have suggested, my move here is to politicize this crisis. I want to consider Freud's concepts as paradigmatic for understanding all human interaction, not just that within the nuclear family. One of the main objectives of this particular transition point for Freud is the division enforced between public life and private life. Fredric Jameson has suggested that the same is true for "first-world," capitalist culture:<sup>3</sup>

one of the determinants of capitalist culture, that is, the culture of the western realist and modernist novel, is a radical split between the

private and the public, between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power. (69)

Once outside of this culture, however, a quite different relationship obtains between the two spheres of action:

Third-world<sup>4</sup> texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.* (69)

Despite some obvious problems with the sweeping nature of his thesis,<sup>5</sup> I think that Jameson's theories can be quite useful for conceptualizing personal and political relations in Caribbean literature, especially *In the Castle of My Skin*. For example, Jameson's model of "third-world" literature gives us a path around Frantz Fanon's assertion that "the Oedipus complex is far from coming into being among Negroes. . . . This incapacity is one on which we heartily congratulate ourselves" (151-52). His reasoning is that "every neurosis, every abnormal manifestation, every affective erethism in an Antillean is the product of his cultural situation" (152). I do not see Fanon's arguments, however, as exclusive of my own attempts to politicize the Oedipal dynamic. I read Freud's theories as allegorical and see no particular problem with translating his fiercely private subject-matter into a paradigm for understanding public interaction. Indeed, Fanon himself argues in favour of deploying such interpretative paradigms, as I am doing, in reference to broader cultural movements:

The Antillean has therefore to choose between his family and European society; in other words, the individual who *climbs* up into society—white and civilized—tends to reject his family—black and savage—on the plane of imagination. . . . In this case the schema of [Joachim] Marcus becomes

Family ← Individual → Society

and the family structure is cast back into the *id*. (149)

Although I acknowledge Fanon's assertion that this process is somewhat different for black Antilleans than it is for white Euro-

peans, I do believe that the Oedipal tensions have the same basic structures in each case.

These Oedipal configurations find eloquent expression in George Lamming's *bildungsroman*, *In the Castle of My Skin*. While acknowledging that the narrative shifts perspective dramatically throughout the novel, I would like to focus on G., the character who seems to me to embody best the structure I am theorizing. G. is useful for this purpose for several reasons, not the least of which is that he is an only son living with his mother.<sup>6</sup> He also represents the broader experience of the village, as Sandra Pouchet Paquet points out:

The central figure, though vividly present in the first person narrative, emerges as a figure whose personal experience crystallizes the experience of the entire community. In a sense he is the village; the history [of] his dislocation echoes the dislocation of the village. He is a collective character. (*Novels* 14)

By focusing on the experience and perceptions of G., wider statements about the community and its experience of paternalistic colonialism can be made. I identify four moments of G's Oedipal development and suggest how each of these represents both a personal stage for G. and his consciousness and a political stage in the life of the village. These moments are: the state of oneness with the mother and mother country, the tension introduced by the British public-school system, G.'s experience of isolation at the High School, and his last dinner with his mother, in which they try to re-create the original situation. The last moment provides a bittersweet *ricorso* to the novel after the agonizing pangs of the second and third stages, emphasizing that, games aside, G. cannot be a child in his mother's house anymore. He must retain and even widen the separation that began at school. He must leave the island.

As the novel opens, however, G. and his mother are on an island of their own—marooned in their own house. G. lives in a state of pre-Oedipal unity with his mother, a state of "oceanic oneness" (Benjamin 148), recalling the undifferentiated liquid atmosphere of the womb. This oceanic impression is strengthened by the presence of the flood on his birthday. He is almost literally in a state of gestation and, like a fetus, is dependent upon his mother for everything.

However, the mother is the flood, too, representing a kind of danger for G. The first words of the novel, "Rain, rain, rain . . . my mother" (9), recall the traditional connection of women and water. She sings, her voice "clear and colourless" (11) like water, moving like waves:

Then she broke off into a soft, repetitive tone which rose with every fresh surge of feeling until it became a scattering peal of solicitude that soared across the night and into the neighbour's house. And the answer came back louder, better organized and more communicative, so that another neighbour responded and yet another until the voices seemed to gathered up by a single effort and the whole village shook on its foundation of water. (11)

Aside from the power of the community that is clearly being expressed here, the first chapter of Lamming's novel is permeated by images of water. Everything is wet, like the world of the womb. I suggest that this symbolism evokes the oceanic nature of the unity Benjamin posits.

By the beginning of the second chapter, the maternal waters are under control and the outside world has invaded that of G. He is being bathed by his mother in a trickle of water from a frying pan. He stands, naked, infantilized, in his yard. He talks baby talk—"Google, google, no more'" (16)—and can barely stand on the slippery stones. Yet he has entered the world; his bath makes him a spectacle for the whole neighbourhood. The neighbour Bob watches the bath from the top of the flimsy fence; he and his mother form an alternative, less positive mother-son dyad. Under the weight of their fighting, "[t]he barricade which had once protected our private secrecies . . . surrendered" (18). The ineffective separation of their yards and lives has ceased to function at all, and neighbours crowd to the tops of their own fences to see what has happened. What they see instead is G., naked and on show:

On all sides the fences had been weighed down with people, boys and girls and grown-ups. The girls were laughing and looking across to where I stood on the pool of pebbles, naked, waiting. . . . The sun had dried me thoroughly, and now it seemed that I had not been bathed, but brought out in open condemnation and placed in the middle of the yard waiting like one crucified to be jeered at. (19)

G.'s mother tries to beat him for allowing himself to be exposed, a scene that will be repeated at the end of the book, though with somewhat different motivations. This scene introduces the first encroachment on the mother-son dyad.

The neighbourhood of the village represents a world in which G. could participate. Lamming blends the villagers into each other in the repeated phrase "Three, Thirteen, Thirty," suggesting a certain childish lack of differentiation in these lives. There is also a certain meretriciousness, an element of the grotesque, in Lamming's description of them. For example, the discussion of black pudding and souse is vividly faecal, detailing how "[t]he cooked intestines of the pig crammed with a potato stuffing makes thick, heavy black coils in the bowl" (31). This description is followed closely by the blending of animal and human in the squalid public sexuality of the village: "The dogs shaggy and obscene in their excitement, the human couples gross and warm in frenzied intercourse" (33). In addition there is the old hag who wets herself once a week and "walks along, her head awhirl with the intoxication of nothingness. The clouds move back, the light leans down, and life oozes, a thick weight, through her congested carcass" (33). The villagers are treated as children here under the colonial father, Creighton. In order for G. to avoid his place among this gallery of grotesques, he must separate himself from his mother, his village, his nation.

This process of separation begins at the village school, where the boys are educated and Anglicized. They become aware of a law and a world outside Barbados, a world of mysterious authority. According to anthropologist Edith Clarke, for a child in this situation, school represented a discrete move away from the world of the mother:

Above all, however, going to school means a break in the continual companionship with the mother. . . . For the first time in his life his mother's authority is challenged and by someone who has undisputed control over him for the greater part of his day. He suffers not because he disobeys her but if he does what she says. . . . Of all this the child is aware. He has to choose between obeying the mother and obeying the teacher. (165-66)

The teacher, then, represents an alternative, dominant authority, comparable to the authority of the father. According to Louis

Althusser, schools function as a primary part of the complex and orchestrated system of Ideological State Apparatuses: "one Ideological State Apparatus certainly has the dominant role, although hardly anyone lends an ear to its music: it is so silent! This is the School" (155).<sup>7</sup> In Althusser's reading, every subject that children study is fraught with ideology. We can see then that the process of education performs two functions: it challenges the mother's authority in order to separate the child from her and it creates subjects of the British Empire. This process is more intense and alienating for children under colonialism, who must find a way to make both their worlds real at the same time.

This process of British education represents the intervention of imperial values into the family. The boys are regimented, drilled, swimming in a sea of Union Jacks. It is a great compliment to them when the school inspector tells them that "such a display as I see here could not have been bettered by the lads at home" (38). The goal has been to Anglicize the boys, to wipe out traces of their own folk culture, to obliterate the mark of the mother. In the process, "the school functions to perpetuate ignorance, confusion, and a destructive cultural dependence on the mother country among its pupils" (Paquet, *Novels* 19) From the disinterested narrator's point of view, they have succeeded. The shift to a third-person narrative at this point is hardly coincidental; we have left behind the realm of the personal.

To return to my original theory, we can see the school system as a particularly effective method of transmitting respect for the paternalistic authority of British colonialism. In this it plays the role assigned to the father in Freud's theory of the Oedipal conflict. Much of the discussion between the boys in this chapter concerns the role of the British government and authority in their own lives. They are trying to synthesize a relationship between what they are taught and what they already know.

This is a painful process for these boys, and the Oedipal crises that change them are mirrored in the community by a series of social changes culminating in the riots. The strike and the riots are the result of the raising of their national consciousness and their recognition of the injustice inherent in their feudal relationship to the landlord, a result of the realization that the village

"is in fact economically and psychologically dependent on a feudal lord whose interests are in direct conflict with its own" (Paquet, *Novels* 15).<sup>8</sup> In some cases, the parallels between the school and the village are striking. Just as the schoolboys plot to stone the unjust head teacher, the adult men plot to kill Mr. Creighton, the landlord. Both plans come to nothing. I suggest that the schoolboys and the villagers are both experiencing the clumsy pangs of individuation, but as the schoolboys grow into colonial consciousness, the villagers grow out of it.

G.'s own Oedipal dynamic is concretized when he moves on to the High School. His imperfect repression of his village roots interferes with the process he desires and thinks he has accomplished: becoming "Britishized." He calls himself an "old boy" (217), a term Lamming uses with a fully ironic intent, italicizing it everywhere to emphasize G.'s pretension. G. prefers to play cricket at school rather than with his childhood friends, because, he thinks, the pitch is better at school than at the crossroads. When the Second World War begins, the High School boys train as British soldiers, and some of them even go off to war. Without understanding their own role very clearly, they mourn the fall of France to the Nazis. As Althusser emphasizes, one becomes a subject when one understands to whom one is subjected: "ideology interpellates individuals as subjects" (170). G. and his friends have subjectivity because they have become British subjects.

This move into subjectivity does not come without a price. G.'s mother, while happy to see her son succeed, is concerned about the cost of his success, of books and uniforms. But there are others costs as well. In seeking and acquiring the veneer of British culture, G. no longer belongs in his own village:

Now that I was at the High School it was easier for me to join [the men], but it was more difficult to participate in their life. They didn't mind having me around to hear what happened in the High School, but they had nothing to communicate since my allegiances, they thought, had been transferred to the other world. (219-20)

G.'s mother, while emphasizing G.'s debt to her, is not too disappointed with his distance from the community. She is the first one to try to separate G. from Bob, and, as Paquet suggests, her "middle-class aspirations put a distance between him and the

village; an isolation that is heightened by his secondary school education and is never really checked" (*Novels* 23). Had she the money, she would have moved out of the district completely. The only friend G. really retains in the village is Pa, highlighting G.'s role as an allegorical figure, since Pa is the town's symbolic father. Nevertheless, one old man cannot compete with G.'s Anglophilic education. Even if he does not consciously realize it, G. is identified with a model of white, not black, manhood.

One of G.'s models for white manhood is the First Assistant at the High School. He is presented in positive terms, as a man "versatile, sensitive and cultured" (226). He represents what G. would like for himself—poetry, theatre, literature. In one puzzling sentence, G. describes him as "the High School without the world which it prepared me for" (227); but the First Assistant is the exception. In general, G.'s education has made him such an individual that he is an outsider everywhere he goes. G. says of his meeting with the headmaster:

It seemed more like a conspiracy than an accusation. Then he said what I had never before been told at the High School. He said they were trying to make gentlemen of us, but it seemed that I didn't belong. Immediately I remembered Bob and Boy Blue who in a different language had said the same thing. (225)

The law of the father has spoken through the headmaster: G. cannot be a white British gentleman. The law of his own people has spoken as well: in attempting to be such a British gentleman, he has excluded himself from them. He has backed himself into a corner from which there is no escape; he is forced into exile. Since he cannot ally himself to either the father culture or the mother country, G. leaves Barbados.

For the village, this process of circumscribing through apparent advancement is mirrored in Mr. Slime's Penny Bank Society. The villagers invest their pitiful amounts of money with him, hoping to make a better future for themselves. They trust Slime to help them by investing their money wisely, but instead he ensures their displacement and destruction as a community. By the time Slime's real motivations become clear, it is too late for them to do anything to stop him or even to protect themselves. Their homes are gone in a move much more destructive than any flood—they have been swept away by greed and capitalism.

For G., this heavily symbolic diaspora assures that, even if he could remain home, home wouldn't be the same. Economics has out-paced Creighton's Village, just as G. has out-paced his society. He can no longer walk as one of them. G. accepts a teaching post in Trinidad, which in Lamming's own life was a step on his way to England. Before leaving home, however, he indulges one more time in the pre-Oedipal oneness he once shared with his mother—a bittersweet last meal at home, marked by fun and mind games.

The setting is eerily reminiscent of the first chapter, and thus functions as a kind of *ricorso* for the pre-Oedipal motif. G. and his mother are again home alone, again it is a special meal; but whereas G.'s ninth birthday cake got spoiled by the rain coming in from outside, the moisture in this atmosphere is coming from the food itself: the cuckoo, the meal G.'s mother makes for him on his last night home. Again, liquid images are evoked: G.'s mother carries a jug of water, he lets his ice cream melt before eating it, and steam comes shooting out of the dish every time a spoon is dug into it. The steam keeps dissipating, however, preventing G. from pretending that he is anything other than a nearly grown man having dinner with his mother. His obsessive concern with his diary also prevents him from losing himself in this relationship. He is not the child he once was. He has secrets.

G.'s mother seems just as anxious to regain some semblance of their earlier relationship. She packs his clothes, making lists so that he will know where everything is. She gives him a Bible and, perhaps most importantly, warns him about foreign women: "they got a generation o' damn lazy young women who can't do one God blessed thing but expose themselves in front a mirror an' go out like a cat baitin' a rat" (269). When she feels he isn't listening to her, she threatens to beat him, even going to get a stick, but, G. says, "I caught the stick and held it tight while she tried to wrench it away. She was like a fencer who had the odds against her. I was taller and much stronger" (266). G., the educated adult male, easily wins the fight for phallic power, and it becomes a shared joke. The longed-for return to the womb has been brought close enough for them to realize how nice such a return might be, but how impossible it truly is.

G. has to leave his Mother, his Mother culture, his Mother country. Yet his experience with British culture has simultaneously prolonged and destroyed his childhood.<sup>9</sup> He has no choice but to leave Barbados.

Along with the demolition of the Oedipus complex, the boy's object-cathexis of his mother must be given up. Its place may be filled by one of two things: either an identification with his mother or an intensification of his identification with his father. We are accustomed to regard the latter outcome as more normal; it permits the affectionate relation to the mother to be in a measure retained. (Freud 32)

Thus, by accepting and using his good education, instead of, for example, teaching at the village school, G. allows himself to accept both parts of his divided identity. He accepts the authoritative nature of British colonialism, but identifies himself as a Barbadian national.

I do not mean to be too glib here in suggesting that G. has created a coherent identity—like all colonial subjects, he is always already divided against himself. The critical collision of folk culture and imperial values creates a tension that all of Creighton's Village feels keenly. One way of reading this collision is through a politicized restructuring of psychoanalytic behavioural paradigms, as I have done here. Clearly there are other possibilities, but G. lives, as he says, "on the circumference of two worlds" (220), each of which considers itself exclusive of the other, and to neither of which he really belongs. His attempts to integrate his own life create the Oedipal tension out of which *In the Castle of My Skin* springs.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Both structures, of course, are supposed to replicate the relationship of the Christian God and His people.
- <sup>2</sup> This is not true for girls, who are expected to retain some vestige of their relationship with their fathers in order to become "good wives."
- <sup>3</sup> This should not particularly surprise us. One of the most common criticisms of Freud is that he took his own fairly narrow historical situation—European, Victorian, patriarchal, capitalist—and claimed universal significance for it, even when that meant relying on such concepts as "race memory."
- <sup>4</sup> The term "third-world" should not be considered pejorative here. Jameson, while acknowledging the uncomfortable breadth of the term, uses it to refer to countries that "have suffered the experience of colonialism and imperialism" (67).

<sup>5</sup> For a carefully argued response that raises many valid objections to Jameson's assumptions, see Ahmad. Ahmad's main concern is with Jameson's "suppression of the multiplicity of significant differences among and within both the advanced capitalist countries and the imperialised formations" (3). See also Jameson's response to Ahmad in the same issue of *Social Text*.

<sup>6</sup> Sandra Pouchet Paquet analyzes the effect of Lamming's elision of his own stepfather in the writing of his semi-autobiographical narrative:

The erasure of a stepfather underscores the myth of the child fathered by a passionate, ambitious, and articulate mother and emphasizes the ensuing anxieties and tensions of a maturing male subjectivity in the absence of grandparents, siblings, and other relatives. ("Foreword" xxi-xxii)

Conveniently, it also shifts the focus more directly onto the relationship between G. and his mother.

<sup>7</sup> Althusser writes:

It takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most "vulnerable," squeezed between the family State apparatus and the educational State apparatus, it drums into them, whether it uses old or new methods, a certain amount of "know-how" wrapped in the ruling ideology (French, arithmetic, natural history, the sciences, literature) or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state (ethics, civic instruction, philosophy). Somewhere around the age of sixteen, a huge mass of children are ejected "into production": these are the workers or small peasants. Another portion of scholastically adapted youth carries on: and, for better or worse, it goes somewhat further, until it falls by the wayside and fills the posts of small and middle technicians, white-collar workers, small and middle executives, petty bourgeois. (155)

<sup>8</sup> I differ with Paquet here in placing the point of realization later than the originary flood. In my reading, the early sections of the book represent a certain belief in the feudal system, or at least a certain comfort with it. By moving the point of questioning to a later date, we can also see how Slime first foments and then takes advantage of the discontent in Creighton's Village.

<sup>9</sup> We are told that most of G.'s classmates in the village school "had become men with weekly wages and women of their own" (219) by the time they are approximately 16 years old. G. is older than that.

#### WORKS CITED

- Ahmad, Aijaz. "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory.'" *Social Text: Theory/Culture/Ideology* 17 (1987): 3-25.
- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971. 127-86.
- Benjamin, Jessica. *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*. New York: Pantheon, 1988.
- Clarke, Edith. *My Mother Who Fathered Me*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1957.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Ego and the Id and Other Works*. Vol. 19 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud. London: Hogarth, 1961.

- Jameson, Fredric. "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text: Theory/Culture/Ideology* 15 (1986): 65-88.
- Lamming, George. *In the Castle of My Skin*. 1950. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1991.
- Paquet, Sandra Pouchet. "Foreword." *In the Castle of My Skin*. By George Lamming. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1991. ix-xxxiii.
- . *The Novels of George Lamming*. London: Heinemann, 1982.