

## *The Martyred Virgin: A Political Reading of Zee Edgell's "Beka Lamb"*

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ZEE EDGELL'S NOVEL *Beka Lamb* (1982) is an uncomplicated but powerful evocation of the lives of ordinary folk as Belize prepares for a new political order. Political concern, awareness, and commitment are so widespread that the novel is more readily seen as a political fable than Michael Anthony's *Green Days By the River* (1967), Ian McDonald's *The Humming-Bird Tree* (1969), Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey* (1970), or Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1983), all canonical West Indian novels of growing up.<sup>1</sup> Not merely "peripheral" (Hunter 19), politics forms the vibrant background against which Edgell recounts her unique narrative. All the major characters, young and old, are involved in the world of politics. Granny Ivy represents the progressive political view which advocates that Belize move as quickly as possible to achieve self-government, because Britain has taken too much and given too little. Accordingly, she becomes the voice of the People's Independence Party (PIP), of which she is a founding member. Miss Eila, Toycie's aunt is not only a neighbour and a friend, but also a political ally, who accompanies Granny Ivy to party meetings regularly held at Battlefield Park. Bill Lamb, her son, is politically at odds with his mother, for he is skeptical of the ability of the PIP to bring economic, social, and ethnic stability to Belize; and he fears the backlash from the PIP's advocacy of closer ties with the neighbouring republic of Guatemala. But above all, although he is not happy with colonialism, he has accepted it and its ambivalent securities. Having worked hard for what he and his family have acquired, he attributes his relative success partially to the flexibility of the colonial system. Caught in a vise of wanting the best for his family and for his country, he cannot answer Granny's repeated assessment of colonialist policy of inhuman

wages, long hours, and its lucrative self-motivated trade in mahogany under the auspices of The Belize Lumber Company. Lilla, his wife, shares her husband's political views, and as a result is almost always disagreeing with Granny Ivy, without being disrespectful to her mother-in-law. Beka, too young to comprehend the implications of political choices, puts to good advantage the privilege of growing up in a home that is both politically aware and politically divided. In spite of the division, she questions and listens to her father comment on the political scene, and she accompanies Granny Ivy to meetings of the PIP, moving quite comfortably between both extremes. She is the hub of the central family of the narrative, a family whose economic, social, and ethnic destiny is a microcosmic image of the community and the country (Ganner 90). For while Granny Ivy and Bill Lamb represent both sides of the changing political coin, it is Beka who is made to represent her country, as is quite clear in her confession to a sympathetic Sister Gabriela: "Sometimes, I feel bruk down just like my own country, Sister" (115).

## II

In large measure, Beka is the central consciousness through which so much description, information, and dialogue are filtered. Although there is a third-person omniscient narrative frame in which Beka's first-person narrative operates, there is no genuine conflict between both narrative voices. For though Beka is corrected, chastised, beaten, slapped, and humiliated, the third-person narrator more often than not takes her side, demonstrating and convincing the reader that Beka's steady maturation must be reckoned with. And there are many factors and individuals who figure significantly in Beka's sure growth. At home, her moral development is assured as she is encouraged, disciplined, and loved; while at school, after she is given a second chance, her academic education begins to pay rich dividends. Moreover, Greatgran, who dies before Beka wins an essay contest, has tremendous faith in Beka's ability to overcome difficulties and to achieve academic success. And Lilla, her mother, who at first has no answer for Beka's lying, intuitively finds a way of allowing the young girl to turn her oral untruths

into written fictions. Lilla's advice and Sister Gabriela's selfless encouragement merge with Beka's efforts to produce the winning essay, thus giving Beka much needed self-confidence.

But it is Toycie Qualo who is the primary human catalyst in Beka's maturation, and her tragedy is the greatest object lesson of all for Beka. For Toycie is Beka's alter ego, a tried-and-true narrative device, but here a necessary one:

Toycie was seventeen, but despite the difference in their ages, a close friendship had grown up between them, not only because there was an exchange of goods and services between the Lambs and the Qualos, but because Toycie remembered what it was like to be fourteen, and Beka had the ability to pretend seventeen. The girls switched backwards and forwards in time as fancy or necessity dictated. (34)

This device allows Edgell the opportunity to show the necessary link between the death of Toycie and the emergence of Beka an individual in her own right. In other words, Toycie dies so that Beka can live, so that Beka can achieve self-motivated, hard-won success. Toycie dies so that Beka, much more cautious and informed in sexual matters, and more politically oriented, can fulfil her own ambitions and those of her friend.

For Toycie, orphaned early, and raised by her caring but virginal and asexual aunt, who cannot provide her with the obligatory counseling about the dangers of sexual play, is first and foremost a victim. It is a not simply a matter of a young girl who lacks sufficient discipline and self-respect, although Toycie displays a tendency towards the forbidden. Toycie is a victim of male duplicity and deception, a martyr sacrificed to social and educational systems she does not comprehend. Edgell is quite clear in her characterization of Toycie, as there is hardly anything that is negative about her, except perhaps her orphanhood and poverty. All praise her virtues, and all admire her academic success. Toycie is bright, talented, helpful, considerate, and lovable; and she, as far as Beka is concerned, exudes a sense of romance and adventure:

She allowed herself the truth and understood that the Qualos were very poor, and there was no romance in it. Toycie had provided the enchanted quality in her environment. She was the one who

touched each humble item in that yard, embellishing everything with bright sparkles of what she believed could be. Toycie's blazing spirit turned petty financial contrivances into minor adventures.

(98)

Such admirable qualities are clear, strong indications of the quality of life Toycie lived, but in the end, despised, she gave up. Toycie is anything but a simple, unfortunate young woman who has given in (O'Callaghan 45); there is much more to her than meets the eye. And the details of her conception, betrayal, and death contain deliberate overtones of sacrifice, of the death of an innocent. She conceives a child in a way which although quite different from the Virgin Mary's conception, is nevertheless immaculate — defined in *Webster's Third International Dictionary of the English Language: Unabridged* (1976) as "conception not preceded by sexual intercourse" (1129). Toycie, not surprisingly, describes her sexual encounter with Emilio in a more directly physical way: "his body didn't go into me" (109). Toycie therefore is a virgin who has conceived, and when she is betrayed by Emilio, she becomes the virgin who is despised because of the putative paternity of the fetus and the attendant public disgrace. But this is where the similarity between Toycie and Mary stops. For although Emilio recants and offers to marry her after he has graduated from school, his heart is not in it, as he attempts to soothe Toycie's ruffled feathers and hurt pride. But Toycie understands much more than Emilio suspects as her account of their first encounter after she discovers she is pregnant reveals: "He said he doesn't believe the baby can be his . . . and anyhow he could never marry anybody who played around with him like I did, because if I can do it before marriage, after marriage I would do it with somebody else" (108). Such a cynical comment allows the reader to experience vicariously the hurt and betrayal Toycie feels at this moment, when all along she has been assured that Emilio would marry her, and when all along she has been faithful.

Toycie then becomes the virgin despised, betrayed, and vilified. Her story can be seen as a counter-narrative to Mary's, and it is recognized as such by Sister Virgil, who, at once, and without deliberation, condemns, suppresses, and nullifies it. And

Edgell's deliberate iconic showcasing seems to confirm Sister Virgil's recognition: "A two-foot statue of the Virgin, her arms outstretched, her stone eyes expressionless, stood on a table beside Daddy Bill's chair" (117). Toycie, the real-life virgin, with pleading eyes and contrite heart, is a study in contrast: "Toycie didn't move, just sat there, feet slightly apart, hands in her lap, hair in disarray, her head tilted slightly to one side" (117). Sister Virgil speaks of "rules," but there is much more that lurks beneath the surface. And in her final recourse to "my conscience" (119), we sense the depth of the insensitivity and betrayal that Bill Lamb, Miss Eila, and Toycie feel as the unfortunate student possessing real academic promise is sacrificed to the god of appearances and reputation. For as destructive as Emilio's betrayal is, the betrayal by St. Cecilia's Academy is the deathblow for Toycie, who has pinned her hopes on the employment possibilities attendant on graduation: "I don't care if I never see Emilio Sanchez Villanueva ever again in my life. You didn't see his eyes. All I want now is to graduate. Aunt Eila works too hard" (109). Self-congratulatory cloistered "rules" and a self-preservative nunnish "conscience" conspire, therefore, to deny Toycie the inalienable right to self-improvement, self-actualization, and the chance for happiness after years of hard work. Toycie's culpa is surely not capitulation to sexual desire; rather it is the placement of a profound faith in love and education. As deep as her faith in and commitment to love and education are, so profound are her feelings of desperation and betrayal. These two central realities have rejected her; consequently, she loses her "sense of reality" (132). The Catholic Church individualized in Emilio, and institutionalized in the Academy, joins forces to destroy a creole life of romance, imagination, and promise.

In its masculine destructive aspect, then, the Catholic Church resembles Tataduhende, the villain of Miss Eila's folkloric narrative told to Toycie and Beka during a holiday at Sibun. He is a sombreroed, thumbless, red-faced predatory homunculus, who out of jealousy, victimizes "unprotected little girls and boys" by breaking off their thumbs and forcing them into a never-ending ritual of similarly victimizing others. And it is indeed ironic

that Toycie, who confesses to Beka that she does not believe in Tataduhende, falls prey to his bourgeois and institutionalized manifestations (Bromley 12). This “unprotected” young woman, without the benefit of the knowledge that a younger Beka possesses — “Didn’t Miss Eila tell you when you having your period first time that sometimes if the sperm from a man touches your vagina, sometimes it can go into you and become a baby” (109) — is a victim of ignorance; for sadly, the necessary crucial information, accessible to almost every young girl with a knowledgeable mother or guardian, is denied her. And Aunt Eila confesses to that crucial ignorance in a candid conversation with the Matron of Belize Mental Asylum: “No man ever approach me for any such reasons, Matron,” Miss Eila said, “Of course, with my crooked body none would so I couldn’t tell Toycie much on that score” (135). It is true, then, that Miss Eila has failed Toycie in this regard; but it is also true that education — the process of imparting vital information to those who need it most — has failed Toycie, who believed so much in its transforming and liberating possibilities.

But there is a vast tragic irony that controls the destiny of the young woman of great promise; for even nature in its destructive aspect seems to have picked out Toycie for special treatment: “Dear Mr Bill, just these few lines to let you know that Toycie died the night of the heavy storm. . . . My Toy wandered away in the confusion of preparation and a mango tree fall to break her skull” (158). Miss Elia’s diminutive endearment, “My Toy,” in its unknowing tenderness, nevertheless establishes the stark truth of Edgell’s characterization: that Miss Qualo has been a “toy,” a plaything of man, of Church, and of nature. In her particularized tragedy, far removed by geography, ethnicity, and social standing, she comes to share immortal company with more famous literary forerunners: Ophelia, Juliet, and Tess, among others.

### III

On the narrative chessboard, as it were, the lead pawn is sacrificed to afford the queen greater strategic mobility; for as important as Toycie’s narrative is, Beka’s is of larger significance, a

fact indicated in the title of the novel. *Beka Lamb*, therefore, is in effect a combination of several narratives, each with its own integrity and meaning; but each is given for the benefit of the eponymous heroine. Beka's autobiography is the nucleus of the narrative organism, drawing its more central force from the peripheral narratives, yet at the same time, strengthening and deepening their individual and collective lives. Like the ethnic mosaic of Belize, Beka's narrative draws into harmony the various racial stories of "Africa, the West Indies, Central America, Europe, North America, Asia, and other places" (11), creating a prismatic, multifaceted fictional world. All the various narratives contribute to the larger education and development of fourteen-year-old Beka, upon whose shoulders rests to a large degree the specific future of the Belizean woman, and generally, of Belize itself. The education of Beka, then, must comprise the removal of weaknesses, foibles, and vices, as well as the consolidation and augmentation of strengths, talents, and virtues. At the same time, Edgell wisely does not compromise the moving realism of her fiction by insisting on or illustrating an idealization of her heroine. The characterization of Beka preserves her integrity and verisimilitude; she is a creature of passion, of intellect, of emotion, of a broad and admirable sympathy that permits her to make mistakes and to correct those mistakes. Where Toycie is the one-time victim of a cruel, masculine denial of the legitimacy of love, Beka is given a second chance to prove herself and vindicate the enormous faith that her family, community, and by extension, her country, have placed in her ability to persevere and succeed.

The novel opens on a warm Friday evening in November towards nightfall and ends a few hours later in the early morning of Saturday, when Granny Ivy returns from yet another meeting of the PIP, whose philosophy she espouses and advocates openly. Beka, who had won the essay competition and a prize medal is waiting up for her paternal Granny, with whom she shares not only the attic but also so much of her life. With Greatgran gone, Granny Ivy now becomes the living, historical link between the past ("befo' time") and the present, from whom Beka receives the wisdom of many years of single motherhood and political

involvement. Granny Ivy, unlike Greatgran Straker, has lived to see that her political efforts have begun to reap rewards: "But things can change fi true" (1). Lost temporarily in her personal reverie about the change in Beka's fortune, she refuses to answer Beka's plea, "What woulda happen to me before time?" (2), a question that is the teleological center of the narrative. For Granny, for unknown reasons, refuses to answer Beka's question, but Edgell obliges and accords her adolescent protagonist, bent on keeping a private, personal wake for her dead friend, an oneiric narrative which is in reality the answer to Beka's pivotal question.

Beka's narrative begins, some seven months earlier, on a Friday in April when she turns her life around: "What Beka recognized in herself as 'change' began, as far as she could remember, the day she decided to stop lying" (17). Beka calmly reports to her parents that she has been promoted to second form, unaware that her father knows that she has failed four subjects. She compounds her lie by insisting that she has passed and draws the ire of her father. Her mother has found her a difficult child and regularly complains to her husband about Beka's "insolence, her laziness, and her ingratitude" (18); and on this occasion she is terribly upset by the fact that Beka has lied about her having swept the attic. Beka, then, has not been a model child by any means, although she is neither vindictive nor malevolent. Her father disciplines her in his usual way, except that this time during the beating the belt buckle, significantly, hits Beka "on the left corner of her mouth," the source of her lies. We are not told just how Beka reacts to this injury and the beating, but we are witnesses to a touching scene involving Beka and her parents, both of whom are really sorry and concerned. But as bad as the beatings are, what hurts Beka most is the name-calling that her father resorts to when Lilla complains: "The worst and most hurtful name of all was when her Dad called her 'phoney.' Liar and thief were bad, but those words didn't really worry her" (19). The hot-combing and lying seemed to Bill to confirm her daughter's phoniness, although he does not accuse Lilla of the same for insisting on the hot-combing and her obsession with roses. By the end of Chapter Four, Beka has quietly confessed to her mother who is hugging



her against her soft breasts that she has failed her tests; later that evening Beka also confesses failure to her father, begging in the same breath for a second chance at school. Reserving his answer, he nevertheless recognizes something in Beka and in the situation that causes him to show a "disbelieving smile" (24), a pleasing cue for Beka to plead for another chance. Beka's confession of the truth, the beginning of the change in her, is engendered by the way she is treated and by the concern and love she is shown by her parents.

The value of the support, concern, and love of one's family is the first major lesson Beka learns as she begins a new phase in her development. This lesson gathers significance and profundity in the growing realization that Toycie had never known the loving embrace of her family. And there is no evidence in the text to indicate that Beka falls back to insolence, laziness, and ingratitude; indeed everything illustrates the real moral change that has occurred in Beka's life. With the knowledge that her parents do really care about her reflected in her genuine care for her younger brothers, Beka has earned her rightful place within her family. She is given responsibility and authority that bespeak a new trust and respect from her parents. This lesson in family education is vital to Beka's development; and the lesson in community education is equally important. Already admirably socialized, she needs to be made politically aware, to be cognizant of what is happening in the political life of Belize. She needs to gain insight into the political options for Belize and into the implications of those options. At fourteen, no one expects her to have any profound thoughts about her country's politics, but what is admirable is her curiosity, manifested in her numerous questions to her father and the Granny Ivy. Her curiosity and her being part of a politically involved and politically divided family are of course invaluable building stones of a possible career in politics, which remains her ambition in the novel. And if her father seems reluctant at times to answer her questions, Granny Ivy compensates for that loss by regularly encouraging Beka to attend the meetings of the People's Independence Party. Although politics is everywhere and on virtually everybody's lips, Beka's early, even somewhat precocious, interest in politics, augurs well for her future and the future of

the country she is made to represent (Flockemann 46; Gikandi 217). And despite the speeches of the Jamaican lawyer and other male individuals, Edgell makes it clear that the future of Belize rests more clearly with the women than with the men.

The most vital lesson that Beka learns as she matures derives from the life and memory of her closest friend, Toycie Qualo. And this lesson is most likely to be absorbed fully because Beka has the painful luxury of having to relive it. Virtually inseparable, Toycie and Beka do have their differences in attitude and in preference. For while Beka remains quite conservative in her outlook, often chafing at the notion of going too far, Toycie welcomes challenges, be they musical, academic, or romantic. And while Toycie cannot seem to get enough of Emilio, Beka does not much care for the young man "who had come between the girls so often . . . that Beka was beginning to feel displaced in Toycie's affection" (47). By nature timid, and always fearful of what could go wrong between Toycie and Emilio, Beka nevertheless keeps to herself the awful secret of late-night trysts between Toycie and Emilio; a secret made even more onerous by her knowledge of Granny's disapproval and warning: "Granny Ivy said that Toycie was trying to raise her colour, and would wind up with a baby instead of a diploma, if she wasn't careful" (47). And the likelihood of this happening becomes all too real when we discover in Granny's confession to Beka, long after Toycie dies, that she too was caught in "Toycie's first trouble" (170). It is left up to the reader to imagine the moral quandary which embroiled Beka: her wanting to tell Toycie of Granny's fear, and her knowing that Toycie, so hooked on Emilio, would not have heeded her advice or warning. Ever the optimist, Beka, in spite of her fear, did not expect anything so tragic to happen to her bosom friend.

Toycie's life, therefore, becomes in an obvious way, the greatest object lesson for Beka; for her personal involvement in Toycie's life and tragedy is the constant reminder of what to avoid and what to embrace. And as Beka stands in the winner's circle, having won the essay contest and the first-place medal, we understand the meaning of Beka's plea for a second chance. It is to enhance her own sense of self; but it is also an opportunity for her in her success to continue what Toycie began, to realize

what Toycie worked so hard to achieve. Encouraged and shepherded by a caring and concerned Sister Gabriela, and aided by Father Rau in her run-in with Father Nunez, who bullies the girls into belief, Beka comes to realize that there are indeed friendly, human members of the clergy who are willing to help those who are in need of help. Though the treatment of Toycie by the Academy will no doubt remain an indelible scar on her mind and soul, Beka can take comfort in the fact that Sister Gabriela knows and understands the meaning of Beka's life and tragedy:

She looked into the ugly face of the nun, and saw behind the Cyrano nose and huge rimless glasses, empathy and a kind of affection. If Toycie had lived, if things had been different for Toycie, she would have been there on the verandah instead of Antoinette, or Dolores, or Beka herself. In Sister Gabriela's eyes was acknowledgement of that fact. (166).

Having made good her second chance at school, having fulfilled the potential that Sister Gabriela discerned in her, having absorbed lessons in political options at home, having developed, with her mother's encouragement and assistance, her writing skills, having acknowledged the need to be alert to the presence and will of Tataduhende, and having suffered with Toycie, Beka seems well poised to move forward with confidence and hope. With the mourning over, with the hurricane past, with political change on the horizon, with a renewed sense of comfort and promise in the future, Beka takes with her the lessons she has learned over the past seven months. And although we do not see her blossoming, we recognize through the symbol of the bougainvillea bush that Beka will grow stronger and sturdier. Cut down, somewhat like Toycie, because of its unchecked growth, it springs back to life but this time supported on a trellis, built "as a remembrance for Toycie" (159). Like the bougainvillea bush, Toycie and Beka share one vital root and stalk; but the old is cut down to allow the healthier and more controlled flourishing of the new.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, on *Crick Crack*, *Monkey Brown*; Kemp; Thorpe; on *Annie John*, see Caton; Karafilis; Timothy.

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