

Reading Contrapuntally

From Raymond Williams's *Country and City* to Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb*

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1. Introduction

It may not be appropriate to start an academic paper with a personal account, but since my personal experience is central to this paper, I need to draw on it briefly. I was born in a small village that may very well disappear within the next ten years. Due to the construction of a dam, many people have left the village and moved to a city located a distance down the river, where they have been offered work in a major car factory. My father ran a small timber business, which is not to say that he worked in an office: He was a physical laborer who rose early (five a.m.) and went into the woods to cut down trees. At that time, the future of the forestry seemed bleak. I vividly remember that the father of one classmate, who also worked in forestry, wrote that his dream was to become a *salary-man* (a white-collar worker). Later, this man committed suicide. My mother, who was born in a relatively large city, abhorred the village and held onto the idea of educating her child as being the only way to “liberate” her. Leaving my father behind, my mother and I moved to a large town so that I could attend a national junior high.

Before assuming his position at that junior high, the sub-deputy used to work in my village. Upon seeing me, he commented, “You must have had a big culture shock, having come from that small village. You seem to have been better suited to that environment.”

Suddenly, I felt myself turning into a baboon, being caged in a zoo. I did not think too much about that comment until I heard an American lecturer making a similar remark to a student from Mali, who was learning English as a second language. Yet, I felt out of place in my native village. That place was full of incomprehensive traditions and customs, and you do not have much chance if you are born a girl.

I left my village and my family early in life. I left because I had become frightened of my parents, as they had become unbearably overprotective of me following the death of my sister. I have been to many places, and yet I have never felt a sense of belonging anywhere. This feeling of alienation informed the connection I felt to Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1958) and my readings of Caribbean literature.

2. Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*

One's way of seeing things is formed, to a certain extent, by the place of one's birth: your birthplace can haunt you, even after you have left it. While reading books for my courses, the feeling of alienation remained, until I encountered the texts written by Raymond Williams. Raymond Williams was a Welsh academic, novelist, and critic. An influential figure in the New Left movement¹ as well as in cultural studies, he was also the first to write ecological criticism in the British context. Unlike many scholars who studied at Cambridge, he came from a working-class background, and his father worked for the railway. In reading *The Country and the City*—which represents the pastoral as seen between the Renaissance/Augustan periods and the post-war era—I could make a connection between the words of the sub-deputy and those of the lecturer that had been directed at the Mali student.

Offering a journey into English literature, Williams provides rich interpretations of the texts written by major figures in English literature, such as William Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, and even postcolonial writers such as Chenua Achebe, and interweaves them with his personal accounts. Through analyses of texts from different time periods, Williams demonstrates how literary works are constructed by society and how the division between country and city has intensified.

What is striking about Williams's *The Country and the City* is that one can see the germination of postcolonial criticism that Williams maps in the relation between

city and country and between metropolis and colonies. After referring to George Orwell's text, Williams argues the following:

What is offered as an idea, to hide this exploitation, is a modern version of the old idea of "improvement" a scale of human societies which theoretically culminates in universal industrialization, all the country will become city; that is the logic of its development, a simple linear scale, along which degrees of development and underdevelopment can be marked. But the reality is quite different. Many development societies have been developed, precisely, for the needs of the metropolitan countries. People who once practiced a subsistent agriculture have been charged, by economic and political force, to plantation economies, mining areas, single crop markets. The setting of prices, on which these areas specialized to metropolitan needs must try to live, is in the decisive control of the metropolitan commodity markets. Massive investment in this kind of supply, and in its kind of economic and political infrastructure, brings in from these specialized rural areas a constant flow of wealth which then further accentuates the dominating interrelations. (284)

Williams does not embark on a fierce criticism of colonialism; nonetheless, he stresses the continuity between the development of a city to the expansion of colonies. As slavery is often regarded as the first form of capitalism, Williams criticizes capitalism as the cause of the division between country and city:

I have been arguing that capitalism, as a mode of production, is the basic process of most of what we know as the history of country and city. Its abstracted economic drives, its fundamental priorities in social relations, its criteria of growth and of profit and loss, have over several centuries altered our country and created our kinds of city. In its final forms of imperialism it has altered our world. (302)

Williams's proximity to communism is explicit in the text, especially when he declares that he is convinced that "resistance to capitalism is the decisive form of the necessary human defense"(302). Referring to Trotsky, Williams underlines that "the history of capitalism was the history of the victory of town over country"(302); similarly, referring to *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels, Williams claims that they, too, blamed the bourgeois for subjecting the country to the rule of the towns (303).

However, he does not overlook the shortcomings of socialism and communism, because the authors of those theories and the works that represent them, especially the *Manifesto*, seem to appreciate the bourgeois for rescuing the semi-barbarians of the country from total ignorance. The *Manifesto* seems to suggest, as Williams claims, that only the urban proletariat, and not the rural barbarians, is capable of creating higher forms of society. Williams's interpretation of the *Manifesto* seems to summarize my sense of unease towards the text, as I have felt that the text was exclusively written for city dwellers, and not for country peasants. Yet, Williams's conclusion somehow resonates the ending of the *Manifesto*: We can overcome division only by refusing to be divided (304). His firm will to connect the divided spaces and to question their intricate relations offers encouragement with which to tackle the still visible fissure between the center and the periphery.

3. Postcolonial Pastoral

The first ecocriticism embodied in Williams's *The Country and the City*, however, encountered criticism from the postcolonial critics. A subtle criticism came from Edward Said, who, in his collection of essays, *Culture and Imperialism*, states the following: "It is dangerous to disagree with Williams, yet I would venture to say that if one began to look for something like an imperial of the world in English literature, it would turn up with amazing insistence and frequency well before the mid-nineteenth century" (82–83).

As Said remarks, Williams places more emphasis on the analyses of canonical British writers' texts in the first two thirds of the text but rarely examines the text by

“postcolonial writers” in the same depth that he appears to have reserved for other English writers, such as Charles Dickens and D.H. Lawrence. Arguably, Williams’s and Said’s primary concerns in their criticisms are different, but what markedly separates them further is their sense of belonging to a place: Williams’s identity is firmly rooted in his beloved village in Wales, whereas Said expresses his lack of belonging to one place in his autobiography, *Out of Place*, and questions the political implications of place and identity.

To put it differently, Williams seems to identify the country and city as fixated entities or as two separate, opposite worlds. Therefore, his declaration “to refuse to be divided” seems, ironically, to consolidate the separateness and the distinction of the two worlds. His rigidity in interpreting the two worlds is echoed in his later notions of social identity, which are fiercely criticized by Paul Gilroy in his *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*.

Although Williams is known as a socially left activist, and, in his novel, he did call for solidarity between the Welsh and the West Indians, Gilroy argues that Williams’s interpretation of “white people” has “rooted settlements” where they lived and formed identities. Gilroy points to Williams’s understanding of racial conflict as merely one between the English working class and the new aliens, or blacks, which dismisses the fact that the “concept of racism has its own historic relationship with ideologies of Englishness, Britishness and national belonging”(53). Gilroy states further that Williams’s understanding of nation and race is reminiscent of conservative racism and nationalism (53).

Perhaps Gilroy’s criticism of Williams stems from Williams’s slight insensitivity toward people whose national identities were denied and altered by colonialist forces. Although linking country and colonies is useful in understanding the “bigger picture,” in so doing, Williams seems to put colonies and their literature into a proverbial “small box,” without differentiating historical and racial specificities. Moreover, reminiscent of his childhood in Wales, Williams’s notion of the country evokes pictures of a rooted community and a static sense of space—images of which Gilroy is critical.

Gilroy's skepticism toward a rooted identity is not a unique stance; it is shared by other Caribbean intellectuals, such as Patrick Chamoiseau, John Bernabe, and most notably, Édouard Glissant. Referring to the idea of Jill Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Glissant suggests that the notion of *rhizome* is incarnated in the Caribbean culture, where the original habitants were wiped away and slaves were brought in, as well as most of the island plants:

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari criticized notions of the root and even perhaps, notions of being rooted. The root is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this they propose the *rizhome*, and enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenge that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principal behind what I call the Poetics of relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other. (11)

Glissant describes European civilization as hereditary, or the “civilization of root,” while he names Caribbean culture as “the culture of rhizome.” Hence, the notion of rootlessness becomes not a negative concept but a positive one that is linked to the idea of creolization and hybridity, often represented in the Caribbean culture.

Furthermore, Glissant reinterprets the notion of ecology from the Caribbean perspective. For him, the European concept of ecology is centered around the mystification of the Earth and its exclusiveness, whereas ecology in the Caribbean is relational, as no one can really possess or claim the land: “... the consequences of European expansion ... is precisely what forms the basis for a new relationship with the land: not the absolute ontological possession regarded as sacred but the complicity of relation”(146).

Glissant distances himself from Western ecology, which is based on the dialectical opposition between nature/civilization and man/God. Instead, he argues that

Caribbean ecology cannot be copied from the European idea of ecology since its dichotomic understanding of nature is a foundation of colonialism.

As Bill Ashcroft argues, structurally connected oppositions, such as white/black, advanced/retarded, Christian/pagan, noble/vulgar, good/evil, beautiful/ugly, human/bestial, teacher/pupil, and doctor/patient are operated in such an ingenious way that they constitute a deceptive categorization while imposing the belief that the “coloniser, white, human and beautiful, teacher and doctor” are collectively opposed to the “colonised, black, bestial and ugly, pupil and patient” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 24).

Consequently, these structurally related sets of binaries both naturalize the widespread belief in the “white man’s burden” to enlighten the uncivilized and the primitive and provide an excuse for the “civilising mission” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 26). Glissant’s skepticism toward the mainstream ecology, mostly Euro-American, stems from this underlying notion of opposites that pit nature against civilization. What, then, does Caribbean literature offer us as an alternative understanding of nature? In the following section, I examine this question through the reading of Caribbean literature, in particular the text of *Beka Lamb*.

4. Early Caribbean Literature to *Beka Lamb* (1982)

It is often said that the Caribbean literature started in the 1930s with the commencement of the independent movement in respective Caribbean islands. Yet, a majority of the texts written in those days, mostly by male writers, were heavily influenced by colonial values.

In *Making Men*, Belinda Edmondson argues that the writings of early Caribbean male writers, such as C.L.R. James, George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, reveal an intricate relation to and dialogue with English Victorian novels—that is, a creative attempt rising out of European heritage. But these early Caribbean male writers all faced the fact that they were culturally Caribbean while their literary tradition was English. The dilemma that these writers faced, according to Edmondson, was due to

this paradox of the “genesis of West Indian nationalism”. In other words, the education that these writers received in the West Indies removed them from the social, religious, and cultural everyday practices of their society, consequently alienating them from the people that they wanted to represent.

Edmondson further discusses the influence that Victorian literature had on the fictional works of these writers. The key characteristic of Victorian literature in this respect, according to the author, is the preponderate and defining factor of “Englishness,” as well as consolidating and “exporting” this notion to British colonies. Despite the efforts of West Indian writers to rewrite the representation of the West Indies, Victorian values had a profound effect on them.

Edmondson points out the fact that C.L.R James’s attempt in *The Black Jacobins* was intended to combine Marxist theory and William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*; in addition, there was Dickens’ influence on George Lamming, and Naipaul’s engagement in dialogue with Anthony Trollope’s *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (1859) or James Anthony Froude’s notorious *The Bow of Ulysses: The English in the West Indies* (1888).²

Another instance of this dialogue with European literature, there is Aimé Césaire’s notion of Négritude as compared to D.H. Lawrence’s idea of cosmology. According to James Arnold, “in Césaire, as in Lawrence, access to a cosmic unity is frequently expressed in terms of a communion of blood, a phallic marriage” (Arnold 63). Indeed, their understanding of cosmology is strikingly similar. For Lawrence the universe is divided into the sun-principle and the moon-principle and that “woman is really polarized downwards toward the centre of the earth. Her deep positivity is in the downward flow, the moon-pull. And man is polarized upwards, toward the sun and the day’s activity” (Lawrence, 1971, 157). In *The Rainbow*, Lawrence refers civilization as male construct while nature as female:

It was enough for the men, that the earth heaved and opened its furrows to them.... But the woman wanted another form of life than this, something that was not blood-intimacy.... She stood to see the far-off world of cities and

government and the active scope of man.... She faced outwards to where men moved dominant and creative, having turned their back on the pulsing heat of creation. (7–8)

This understanding of cosmology is quite present in Césaire's representation of woman in his *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* and it could be said that this form of representation is the result of his dialogue with those European modernist writings which had a certain framework of representation and symbolism regarding women. This may be the reason why Maryse Condé claims that the quest for identity within Négritude poetry is a male quest while Africa is often figured as feminine and maternal. African culture is often incarnated and idealised as the figure of a woman whom a male hero attempts to rediscover and repossess. She claims that "the black woman-mother comes to serve as the 'ground' upon which black, male selfhood and the new nation are built" in Négritude writing, consequently depriving women of "any active role, of a place in that nation, and of identity, herself as a woman" (Haigh 124).

In the Anglophone Caribbean, the impact of Victorian education in the Caribbean explains the belated prominence of women writers in the region. In *White on Black* (1998), Jan Nederveen Pieterse argues that the Victorian educational curriculum for the elite was permeated with a social stratification arranged according to class, race, and gender. He points out that anthropology in the Victorian era "saw racism, classism and sexism as facets of the same world view and expression of the same logic"(219). This suggests a profound influence of the colonial mentality on education in the colonies.³ Such values influenced the creation of early Caribbean literature and delayed the emergence of women writers.

In this sense, a reading of *Beka Lamb* may be relevant in describing the evolution of Caribbean literature and Caribbean culture, as both grew out of Victorian values. The novel, written in 1985—during the period of second-wave feminism—demonstrates the maturation of a young girl, Beka, as well as her views on sociocultural changes in Belize.

5. Reading *Beka Lamb*

Postcolonial literature has become a testing ground where many writers attempt to deconstruct the binary oppositions between a fiction and the reality. Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb* (1982) offers such an instance. Zee Edgell, an internationally acclaimed Caribbean woman novelist, was born in 1940 in pre-independent Belize, known as British Honduras. As in other postcolonial writings, her novel incorporates many of her autobiographical elements. *Beka Lamb*, published just a year after the independence of Belize, is set in 1950s' pre-independent Belize.⁴ The story revolves around a girl, Beka Lamb, and her family, a black, relatively well-off family in Belize. Through the portrayal of the family, Edgell reveals the political and social changes that were taking place at that time. Each member of Beka's family represents the differences reflected in each generation: Beka's grandmother, Granny Ivy, is weary of creole political power and unsure of the future of Belize, whereas Beka's father, a member of the Union Party, disapproves of educating girls and wants his daughter to be proud of being black. Beka's mother, Lilla, supports Beka's education and is a "good housewife": She keeps roses in her garden and tells Beka to water them but not other tropical plants. This obsession with growing roses in the tropics can be found elsewhere in Caribbean literature, as a fascination with roses seems to be prevalent among the Caribbean people and demonstrates the complex feelings that the colonials have toward the British culture.

Central to the story is Beka, her best friend, Toycie, and their days at a Catholic convent school. Their convent school is depicted as a special space, entirely cut off from the rest of Belize, as "the majority of students, among whom were the poor, the rich, the brilliant and the mediocre, acquired the art of suppressing segments of their personalities, shedding the lives they led at home the minutes they reached the convent gates" (112). Beka and Toycie function as mirror images in the novel: Beka is a little clumsy, family-bound, and slow on the uptake, while Toycie, who is being raised by her aunt, is beautiful, slender, and an outstanding student. The girls study together, play together, and share many precious memories of their childhood while spending holidays together at their family countryside retreat.

Their close relationship slowly changes, however, as Toycie begins to date Emilio Villabueva, the only son of a rich mestizo family. She becomes more involved with him and eventually confides to Beka that she is pregnant. Because Toycie is black, she has no prospect of marrying Emilio, who is planning to leave Belize to enter a university in Mexico.

Beka and her family plead with the deputy of the convent school, Mother Vigil, for Toycie to be allowed back into the school:

Well, sister, Miss Ella and I [Mother Vigil] will leave you now with Toycie, as I can see, as you say, there is nothing you can do. Maybe in your position I would do the same. Who knows? My daughter is in this academy and I pray to God she makes in through school. But because of Miss Eila here, and because of Toycie, I feel I must tell you this: you have been principal of this academy for two years so maybe you don't yet realize the financial strain people are under in this country. Families without resources have no strings to pull when their children get in trouble.... Miss Eila here, has worked from morning to late night for Toycie's education, making bread and buns for sale, after cooking all day in other people's houses. She is a simple woman, like many of our women, in certain matters, and she had one ambition, to see Toycie graduate from your wonderful academy. You say things will change, Sister. It'll be too late for Toycie here, and others like her, but the woman brave enough to make that change should be crowned Queen of the Bay at Battlefield Park! (120)

Yet Mother Vigil reprimands Toycie and firmly rejects the idea of the girl returning to the school:

We women must learn to control our emotions, Mr Lamb. They are times we must say "enough" whatever our feelings. The rate of illegitimacy is quite high and has been high for a long time. The women will have to decide for a change in their lives, otherwise they will remain vulnerable. Under prevailing

conditions, I cannot see much hope for the long term development of this country. (120)

Sister Virgil accuses Toycie for failing to control her emotions and will not do anything to support her. This denial of education was a denial of Toycie's future; hence, she slowly loses her will to live and is finally sent away to an asylum.

Having been separated from Toycie, Beka eventually learns to stand on her own two feet. Her slow change in attitude and appearance is as if Toycie has merged into her. Things take a turn when Sister Gabriella asks Beka to enter an essay competition. Beka is not convinced that she has the ability to compete, and her grandmother, Miss Ivy, discourages her granddaughter, saying that that it is no use competing because "the *bakras* or *pania* girls" will receive the prize (116). The *bakras* refers to white, and the *pania* refers to a person of Hispanic origin. In this scene, Edgell delineates the internalized inferiority in Beka's grandmother's generation and the changing attitudes in the younger generation, represented by Beka. Beka finally decides to enter the competition on behalf of Toycie, who should have been there to enter the competition instead of her.

In the novel, a hurricane plays an important role. First, the 1931 hurricane is the reason for Toycie's parents' death; in the second hurricane described in the novel, Toycie kills herself by jumping from a mango tree. It is also during the hurricane that Beka conceives of the idea of writing the essay and finalizes her piece. With Toycie's parents' death, the hurricane may appear to be a threatening force; in Toycie's case, however, the hurricane can be interpreted as an act of grace, because it brings an end to her suffering. In Beka's case, the hurricane becomes a crucial factor that enables her to begin her work.

The way in which the hurricane is portrayed in *Beka Lamb* differs from the way in which natural disasters are portrayed in European novels. For instance, in Joseph Conrad's *Typhoon*, as is in his other works, the typhoon is a force that opposes the protagonists; the hurricane in *Beka Lamb* is portrayed in a way that is representative of Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction and creation. In any case, hurricanes portrayed

in Caribbean literature are bestowed with more meaning and are incorporated into people's lives. To borrow the idea that Antonio Benitez-Rojo expressed in his work, *The Repeating Island*, hurricanes and other natural disasters have become a part of the Caribbean culture, representing its sociocultural fluidity and ethnological and linguistic clamor (Benitez-Rojo 3).

After the hurricane, Beka submits her essay, which wins the first prize for the essay contest, and her family talks about planting new plants to replace the uprooted ones. Beka's mother asserts, "I'm turning over a new leaf, Bill. I'll keep the bushes that survived, but I'm not expending too much energy anymore cultivating rose bushes" (164).

Instead of roses, Beka's mother will plant vegetation more suited to the tropical climate. Her decision is symbolically significant with respect to the political changes that accompany Belize's slow move toward independence. Arguably, since the changes occur as a result of the hurricane, the hurricane in the novel is endowed with the power of destruction and creation while encouraging the Caribbean people to take the next step. Moreover, the movement toward building a new nation is linked to Beka's maturation and independence.

Upon winning the first prize for the essay contest, Beka contemplates: "If Toycie had lived—if things had been different for Toycie—she would have been there on the veranda instead of Antoinette or Dolores...or me"(166). Beka embraces the death of her best friend and is determined to live her life to achieve what Toycie was not able to achieve in her life. Therefore, the novel can be read as a wake for a best friend—as well as a wake for those who lost their lives in times of slavery and natural calamity, and who did not survive to witness a new nation being built by their descendants.

The celebratory mood with the coming of their country's independence can be seen in the scene in which Beka's mother cooks all sorts of dishes that represent each tribe that lives there. Nonetheless, the novel's end differs from that typically seen in stories written by male writers. Beka tells Gran Ivy that the climate of Belize does not suit her, and she decides to leave the country in the wake of independence. On account

of this development, *Beka Lamb* stands in stark contrast to earlier Caribbean literary texts written by male authors, wherein female characters remain in the country while the male protagonist leave to pursue their dreams. In this way, *Beka Lamb* seems to herald a new future for women, where they are no longer tied to the domestic sphere.

6. Conclusion

Beka Lamb is one of the earliest novels in the Caribbean literary canon to have a black and independent female protagonist. Unlike earlier Caribbean literary texts, nature is not feminized in *Beka Lamb*; rather, it is there as a part of the protagonist's life. The protagonist does not "fight" the forces of nature, but does decide to leave the island in the end.

Raymond Williams's credo of "refusing to be divided" rings hollow when one looks at the modern landscape. I believe we are disparately divided. Williams's Wales may still enjoy prosperity, even as my village will certainly disappear in the near future; weeds continue to overgrow and overwhelm its people. People in remote rural areas in this country have been suffering from tumbling rates of population growth and deteriorating infrastructure. Likewise, some part of the Caribbean islands are owned by multinational companies for leisure purposes, and natural resources in former European colonies in Africa are still being exploited. Indeed, the pull towards the center is stronger than ever.

The gap between the city and the country came to be most visible in the disaster of 3.11, as it was found that some areas of Fukushima prefecture had essentially been sacrificed for the people of Tokyo, in the name of supplying them with cheaper electricity. We must refuse to be divided; however, we need to become aware of the fact that modern society is based on a system of sacrifice.

It may be difficult for us to consider a natural disaster as a kind of blessing rather than a mere happening after the 3.11. If Caribbean literature has something to tell us, it would be the resilient way to embrace the deaths within us and to acknowledge the importance of coexisting with nature. As Caribbean literary texts demonstrate, nature, without being ominous or a thing to be controlled, imparts to us the fluidity of

the society and the precariousness of our lives. If a literary text can tell us something, it may be that human strength and resilience are needed to draw out the meaning in our lives, no matter where we are headed.

Notes

- 1 The New Left movement was a movement closely linked to the labor movement, which sought to tackle social issues such as gay rights and gender inequality in the 1960s to 1970s.
- 2 C.L.R. James's favorite novel was Thacharey's *Vanity Fair*, whereas Naipaul's novels have a rich reference to English and European literature.
- 3 For instance, a behavioural Darwinist, Francis Galton regarded women are inferior to men.
- 4 The former name of Belize was British Honduras. It was under the rule of the British Empire from the seventeenth century. It gained its independence in 1981. Its population is made up from 35% of Maya and European descent(Mestizo), 25% of Creoles, 15% of Spanish, and 6% of Afro-Amerindian. It is located in the continent, but is usually considered as a part of the Caribbean.

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