

## Cultural Hybridity and Racial Identity in George Lamming's *The Emigrants*

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### **Abstract:**

In the eighteenth century, Western countries took over a considerable part of the world. The colonized communities did everything they could to escape the colonizers and the oppression they suffered under them. Some of the significant measures included fleeing to other countries for a better life, better jobs, and education. In his novel *The Emigrants* 1954, George Lamming tells the tales of Caribbean emigrants who flee to London in search of a better future and opportunity. He identifies the emigrants' cultural hybridity and racial identity crises during their journey to London, and after settling there. He uses linguistic styles to draw attention to colonialism, how the colonizers looked down on their subjects, and the subjects struggle for liberation. A literary analysis of the novel reveals that the emigrants struggled with cultural hybridity and racial identity.

**Keywords:** racial identity, cultural hybridity, George Lamming, *The Emigrants*, culture, race.

### **الملخص:**

احتلت الدول الغربية جزءاً كبيراً من الكره الأرضية في القرن الثامن عشر. حاولت الشعوب المستعمرة كل ما في وسعها للالفلات من المستعمرات والاضطهاد الذي واجهوه. كان الفرار إلى دول أخرى من أجل حياة أفضل ووظائف أفضل وتعليم من بين التدابير المهمة.

في روايته "المهاجرون" عام 1954 ، يروي جورج لامينغ حكايات المهاجرين الكاريبيين الذين يفرون إلى لندن بحثاً عن مستقبل أفضل وفرصة أفضل. ويحدد أزمات التهجين الثقافي والهوية العرقية للمهاجرين خلال رحلتهم إلى لندن ، وبعد الاستقرار هناك. يستخدم الكاتب أساليب لغوية لإبراز الاستعمار ، وازدراء المستعمرات لشعوبهم ، وحركة الرعايا من أجل الحرية. وفقاً للتفصير الأدبي للرواية ، كافح المهاجرون مع التهجين الثقافي والهوية العرقية.

**الكلمات الرئيسية:** الهوية العرقية، الوراثة الثقافية، جورج لامينغ، رواية المهاجرون، الثقافة، العرق.

### **پوخته:**

له سمهى هەزىدە وولاتانى رۆزئاوا دەستىان گىردى بىسمر بىشىكى گۈورەتىمەن دا. وولاتە داگىركرامەكان ئەمەنلى لە دەسىلەتىان بۇو كەردىان بۇر زىگار بۇون لە چىنگى داگىركرامەن ئەمەنلى كەردىان. نەمەنلىك لە كارانە ھەلھەن بۇو بۇ وولاتانى تر بۇ خۆدورخىستەنە دەستىكەنەتى كارى باشتىر و خوپىندىن.

لە رۆمانى كۆچپەران 1954 دا، جۈرج لەمېنگ، چىرەزىكى كۆچپەرە كارېبىيەكان دەكىيەتىمەن كە بۇ كەرمان بەدوای پاشەرۆزىكى باشتىر و دەرفەتىكى باشتىر ھەلھەن بۇ لەندەن. نۇو سەر كەلتۈرى دوورەگى (كەلتۈرى تىكەللاو) و كېرىوگرەتى ناسنامەنە رەمگەزى كۆچپەرەكان دەكارى دەكەنلىكى كەمەتەنەن بۇ لەندەن و دوای نىشەجىبۇنیان لەمۇي. ئەمەنلىك لە كاردا دەھىتىت بۇ ئەمەنلىكى سەرنج رابكىشىت بۇ داگىركرامەن، چۈن داگىركرامەن بە كەممى سەپىرى ئەمە وولاتانەيەن كەردىو، وە

هەوێل و کۆششی ژیردەستەکان لەپیناوا سەرەبەخۆبى. شىكارى ئەدەبى بۆ رۆمانەکە دەرىدەخات كە کۆچپەران نالاندويانە بە دەست كەلتورى دوورەگى و ناسنامە نەژادىيەوە.

**کيلە ووشە:** ناسنامە نەژادى، كەلتورى بۆماوەبى، جورج لەيمىنگ، رۆمانى كۆچپەران، كەلتور، نەژاد.

## Introduction

A postcolonial author, George Lamming is seen to have his origin grounded in the Caribbean Islands and therein, he has experienced colonialism's harmful impacts on the native population. However, Lamming does not lose all the hopes of fighting against or resisting the then persistent colonial legacy, and instead, tries to grow his "anti-colonialist discourse through producing literary texts in which he aims to raise awareness of the native peoples concerning their cultural and psychological destruction that emerged because of a long history of colonialism in the native land" (Karagöz, 2019, p. 222). Lamming's *The Emigrants* emphasizes the Caribbean islands' population variety, which in turn highlights the many extant races, cultures, and ethnic descents as a result of immigration from other nations. The belief that has been initiated by Lamming, suggests that the varied groups, which have been afore-mentioned in the Caribbean islands are capable enough of founding their political order with the help of their identical and common experiences along with all kinds of suffering they have faced that is initiated by the white colonizers (Karagöz, 2019).

Specifically, Lamming tries to suggest that the native people who resides in the Caribbean Islands are seen as individuals that has inferior status and the superior ones are the white colonizers. Lamming in *The Emigrants* ensures to place all the psychological restructuring, experiences, and the plight of all the immigrants of the Caribbean. It has also been understood that the center of the novel lies amidst the European Metropolis (Karagöz, 2019). Herein, the instances of racial identity along with cultural hybridity are highlighted in the novel. These aspects have been properly considered in this paper and hence, after proper portrayal, the novel can be understood alongside acknowledging the true intention of the novelist.

## Literature Review

Conolly (2004) suggests that the "post-colonial appropriation" compels most of the writers at that period, which "anticipates the post-colonial critic's preoccupation with hegemony, language, place and displacement, abrogation and appropriation as strategies of cultural decolonization and national reconstruction" (p. 798). This is evident, significantly, in *The Emigrants* which is a grand narrative in itself with reasons accounting to the core themes incorporated into it i.e. the concerned novel. The novel written about the Caribbean Islands ensures to engage all the modern themes that are prevalent in the Caribbean along with the aspects of decolonization, which is evident in the existing literature. The decolonization literature had instances of "colonialism and nationalism, emigration and exile, tradition and modernity, identity in the context of race, class, gender, and ethnicity, cultural hybridity, the interdependence of oral and written cultural traditions and the role of the writers in a time of revolutionary social change" (Conolly, 2004, p. 798). Similarly, Guruprasad (2014) asserts that *The Emigrants* ensures to depict a picture, wherein, instances of colonialism and aspects of racism are highly evident. Furthermore, it can be closely understood that the entire novel is about the novelist's

idea of dealing with the colonial expansion along with its impact on the Caribbean Islands in a precise manner.

Moreover, in the novel, Lamming underscores the “enlarged consciousness of the emigrant after the decline of the European Empires”. Specifically, “the colonial masters have been decentered as the colonizers saw themselves at the center of the world, while the colonized were seen at the margins.” (Guruprasad, 2014, p. 284) this significantly suggests the kind of issue, which persists in the countries, which are colonized. Specifically, at that period most of the writers, both politically and intellectually exiled to varied metropolitan cities and therein, the notion of exile and emigration appeared to them. This also is the case for Lamming and the precise illustration of such an instance is evident in the *The Emigrants* (Guruprasad, 2014). Furthermore, (Karagöz, 2019, p. 224) asserts that being a writer of the post-colonial time, Lamming has the chance to be in London and observe the complete western mindset so as “to observe the colonialist mindset personally in detail and develop his postcolonial argument in his writings”. Therefore, while writing down the literary texts, Lamming has turned into one of the other authors, who lived in West India and that is why, his fiction has the impacts of local dialects amidst which “a long oral tradition of story-telling and folk poetry” (Karagöz, 2019, p. 224).

Furthermore, Karagöz suggests that Lamming is supposedly a prominent writer and far apart from the others because of the linguistic features, which he incorporates precisely in his fiction. Moreover, he has a deep interest in those features immensely, which in turn, shapes how his diligence is prominent in precisely guiding the Caribbean and other such nations that are colonized and has understood how colonizers looked on the countries, which were colonized (Karagöz, 2019). Similarly, Shaffer (2008) emphasizes on the precise notion for which Lamming is able to relate to the ill-effects of colonialism incorporated his arrival and since then they quite well realize how Caribbean natives are treated, which in turn, makes the book in the way it is now (Shaffer, 2008). This directly suggests how Lamming has its roots grounded in the interests of the Caribbean origin, which is one of the reasons for making such an impact on the mindset of the readers.

Sherwani and Dizayi (2019) also suggest that colonialism depicts the dominant culture initiated by the Western countries or rather the colonizers. The dominant culture basically describes a “sense of superiority that exists between the two different ethnicities within a particular domain” (p. 1276) that has been reflected appropriately. Specifically, Lamming ensures that the Caribbean natives can well-understand the power they hold against the colonizers as depending on the varied people of different castes, race, and origin, they (Caribbean natives) are the ones, who can go against the colonizers if they realize their ability significantly (Sherwani & Dizayi, 2019). In this regard, Karagöz (2019) reflects that the main way through which both racial identity and cultural hybridity are evident in the book can be reasoned back to the fictional words, which are subsequently used by Lamming. The novelist claims that “literary texts do not construct only fictional worlds which provide the reader with delight and leisure time activity; instead, they act as a kind of sphere in which there exists an opportunity to contest the colonial discourses of the Western scholars” (Karagöz, 2019, p. 225). These statements have influenced the idea of incorporating “extraordinary linguistic styles” and specific lexicons in the book to feature “an adjustment of word use and spelling to give an accessible rendering

of dialect forms" (Karagöz, 2019, p. 225). This clearly explains that the presence of racial identity and cultural hybridity is acknowledged in the novel precisely.

## Discussion

George Lamming's novel *The Emigrants* focuses mainly on the emigrants' sea journey and settling process in London. It details the lives and journey of a group of West Indians who move to Great Britain in the 1950s to seek better educational opportunities- the kind their country could not provide. The emigrants are forced to settle uncomfortably in a foreign country's industrial cities that are nothing compared to their home. Their experiences provide Lamming with the fictional framework to explore alienation, ghettoization, and a new sense of culture and identity for the West Indians. The migrants experienced Britain in very contrasting terms, comprising of the Britain that colonized them and treated them as subjects back in their motherland, and the Britain that rejected and treated them as aliens and foreigners once they landed on its soil. Lamming draws attention to the emigrant's experiences and challenges in the new country (Ashcroft et al., 2004). Notably, the emigrants struggle with cultural hybridity and racial identity in London.

The experiences of cultural hybridity in the novel are mainly compounded by the diversity of people and places encountered. For example, the French port was certainly different from the Port of Spain, which was equally different from Trinidad and Barbados. As a result, migrants had to experience a variety of cultures and try to live and practice them all at the same time. The attempt to balance the practice of multiple cultures often proved a major challenge for the migrants. For instance, Britain was quite different in terms of culture from Trinidad because the narrator observes that in Trinidad, "I had known a greater personal freedom" (Lamming, 1994, p. 8). Thus, fitting into the new culture of Britain where freedom was limited especially for the foreigners and aliens from the British Caribbean colonies became a whole different cultural experience for the migrants. There is no doubt that the major allure for the migrants coming to Britain from the Caribbean islands believed that they would integrate fully into the culture and land of Britain. These migrants had already learned and interacted with the English language and most of the essential symbols, artifacts, and cultures in their motherland, and thus believed it would be quite easy to fit into Britain and adopt its way of life. As a result, the migrants were drive to go to Britain by the fact that "whatever the difference in their past experience, they seemed to agree on one thing...they were taking flight from something they no longer wanted" (Lamming, 1994, p. 37). That which the migrants no longer wanted is to experience the conflict and clash of cultures in their motherland, where their native Caribbean cultures conflicted and clashed with the British colonialist culture. Consequently, the migrants had opted to give up their culture holistically so they could move to Britain and adopt, embrace, and practice the British culture in its entirety. However, upon arrival in Britain, the migrants did not only face hostilities from the Britons but also faced rejection. The outcome was that the migrants faced the major challenge of cultural hybridity and threatened racial identity, forcing them to turn into building smaller communities of homogenous cultural and racial identity within the British industrial cities.

*The Emigrants* describes the journey and experiences of a group of West Indians: The Governor and Tornado, Trinidadians who served in the RAF; the Jamaican, Collis, a writer; Philip, an aspiring law student; Dickson, a school teacher from Barbados. It is split into three sections: 'A Voyage',

‘Rooms and Residents’ and ‘Another Time.’ “Rooms and Residents’ depicts London as a series of interiors and basement dwellings,

The men couldn't see each other in the dark, but they took it for granted that they were not in the wrong place. When the door closed, blocking the light, the street disappeared like a thief, and the steps led them feebly in a crooked angle along the walls down towards the basement. The change was too obvious for comment, and their silence suggested that the atmosphere had produced a similar sensation in each. The stairs descended uncertainly like raindrops trickling down the wounded face of a rock. The angle sharpened here, the next step was missing, and suddenly like a blow on the head, the foot made a final drop, and the body fought for its balance before preparing to move on. They drew closer now, waiting without a word for someone to explore the dark. (Lamming, 1994, p.127)

This opening description depicts the emigrants’ descent from the white world they have left to the black British world they are about to settle in. The darkness, twists and turns, missing steps, and silence illustrate the emigrants’ cultural discontinuity.

Lamming describes the emigrants’ indoor dwellings as crime dens. The “hard rigid nakedness” of Fred Hill’s barbershop, which was "cell-like" with the door "shit tight" and the window "solitary barred", depict a lack of freedom and confinement. When the Jamaican says, "they think there is some black underground connecting every one of us" (Lamming, 1994, p. 157), it becomes clear that the barbershop is a criminal underworld. However, the doorway leading to the barbershop symbolizes a sense of belonging- inclusion. The Africans, West Indians, and Afro-Americans that the door admits find a new culture, one in which they all dwell. The author describes their experience as of “surprise and rescue” that qualify the “crease of light” that appears when the door slides open (Lamming, 1994). This cultural hybridity is further strengthened when the author describes Fred Hill’s customers as his “immediate community” (Lamming, 1994, p. 128).

On the barber shop’s wall, the emigrants observe and admire an American jazz band’s photographs.

They turned to admire the photographs that were stuck on the walls, photographs of an American jazz band whose members had given their autographs to the barber. These faces smiling and expansive betrayed a curious, reciprocal intimacy between them and the instruments that were held so lovingly to their mouths. The barber felt their admiration, and turned to give information about the different players. (Lamming, 1994, p. 131)

The reciprocity between the band members and their musical instruments translates to a "new intimacy" between the immigrants (Lamming, 1994). With Fred Hill's endless chatter with his customers, the emigrants collectively refine a communal identity in these basements.

The Caribbean islands were home to many people of various ethnicities and racial descents (Karagoz, 2019). It accommodated “Jamaican”, “Grenadian”, and “Barbadian” (Szeman, 2003). When the emigrants first meet in the sea journey, their conversations revolve around their differences in superiority. To prevent more dissenter views, the Governor warns them, “All you down here is my brothers ... ‘an’ that’s why I tell you as I tell you to stop this monkey-talk ‘bout big islan’ an’ small

islan'" (Lamming, 1994, p. 39). The emigrants' heterogeneity in cultural and national traits makes it harder for them to adopt and reinforce a strong racial identity. Clearly, the Governor understands that focusing on their shared experiences (colonialism and migration) at this point is better than raising the differences between small and big islanders.

Fred Hill, as he engages his customers who listen in 'respectful and approving silence,' asserts the benefits of a communal spirit for the emigrant community (Lamming, 1994). Lamming reports, "The main historical point o' dis age is dis ... It is de age of colonial concern." 'Dat's why we in all the colonies will fight". His eagerness to make the point had turned almost to anger. 'Fight,' he added vehemently. 'Tis the time to fight.' (Lamming, 1994, p. 132). His assertions point explicitly at a collective political consciousness with the possibility of a revolution. In other words, they illustrate the group's capabilities to form a political identity that merges their diverse racial and cultural constructs.

When the immigrants arrive in London, they instantly observe that it seems significantly different from the London they expected. The portraits the colonizer had depicted "a promising city center for them". However, damage and gloom dominated London's condition after World War II (Karagoz, 2019). The current state of the city crushes immigrants' hopes and dreams of a better future. Even for Higgins, who seemed to have clear plans for his stay in London, he ends up frustrated and miserable. At the ship, Higgins mentions:

'Tis the same school the cook on this ship went to. I send twenty letters an' they say whenever I was ready I could come once I had good testimonials. The Chief on the tanker see to it things would be all right an' give me a splendid word. An' that was that. I sen' in the application form an' they simply repeat that I only had to say when I was comin'. Once I had the fees and recommendation. I sen' them and make sure I know what I was goin' to do. (Lamming, 1994, p. 69-70).

Sadly, the new London drifts him further from his hope of attaining higher status as a cook to an unproductive and unsuccessful life, as Lillian notes: "Poor Higgins was there ... but you doan know the botheration he went through. From one thing to a next. They say he used to say people wus following' him ... He was tryin' to get back home as a stowaway" (Lamming, 1994, p. 236). The migrants live in deplorable conditions, lack opportunities, and face disappointment, which though destructive and painful, strengthen their Caribbean identities and their connection to their home country (Thiong'o, 1978).

In addition to the disappointment and hopelessness, the emigrants suffer racial discrimination in London. The Caribbean people had the vision to integrate into the British system despite their marginalization and low social standing (Karagoz, 2019). The narrator articulates this vision as follows:

For it would be a lie to deny that on the ship and even in the hostel, there was a feeling, more conscious in some than others, that England was not only a place, but a heritage. Some of us might have expressed a certain hostility to that heritage, but it remained, nevertheless, a hostility to something that was already a part of us. (Lamming, 1994, p. 237)

However, the West Indians quickly realize the apparent differences between them and the colonial world. The author wrote, "But all that was now coming to an end. England was simply a world which we had moved at random, and on occasions encountered by chance. It was just there like nature, drifting vaguely beyond our reach" (Lamming, 1994, p. 237). The emigrants face discrimination in housing as the imperial center declines to shelter them despite their desperation. Their visions for prosperity in England dissolve into disillusion, and they revert to identify themselves with the Caribbean islands. In the ship, Tornado (who has been in England before) tells the group that he wishes that his bones are buried in Trinidad (Lamming, 1994). Tornado's assertion and experience demonstrate that the emigrants keep their identities once they notice the division between them and the Englishmen.

## **Conclusion**

From the literary point of view, it was crucial for the emigrants to invest a cultural and racial identity that merged the differences in the Caribbean and British cultures. George Lamming illustrates this importance through the use of language. At every stage in their journey, the emigrants seemed to suffer from a cultural or racial clash. At sea, the West Indie emigrants encountered differing viewpoints among themselves- those from the small versus those from the big ones. Upon reaching England, they meet more migrants from Africa. Together, they strive to achieve their visions amidst racism and racial discrimination from the Englishmen. In the end, the emigrants feel alienated and lose their previous identity without gaining a new one.

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