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The Wake in Caribbean Literature: a Celebration of Self-knowledge and Community

Most writers in the Caribbean have been haunted by a certain number of common themes and have followed common tracks, although most often differing in approach and writing — the (im)possibility of the narration of one's story when the very notion of person has been trampled down by slavery and colonisation, writing in exile, the conditions of emergence of a new Caribbean identity, the investigation of the past, individual and collective, and last but not least, childhood, through the childhood novel, as a necessary basis of exploration of oneself and one's community. Writers have also often focused on past oral and social traditions, so as to examine the part they take in the evolution of contemporary society and psyche. The wake is one of the traditional rituals which still seems to be constitutive of Caribbean identity, both in society and in fiction.

Beka Lamb by Zee Edgell from Belize, highlights the wake not only as a ritual of death but also as a celebration of self-knowledge and community. It also uses this ritual as the backbone of the narration, and it seems interesting to examine how the ritual in society and its celebration in writing are fused together in order to urge the rebirth of self and its integration within the community. Two short stories might also be interesting to mention in that respect: "The Dolly Funeral" by Lorna Goodison, and "Ballad" by Olive Senior.

Beka Lamb was published in 1982, the year following independence, but it projects the reader in the late 1970s, right in the middle of the political struggle that opposed the British Crown and Guatemala,

a country whose territorial claims on British Honduras had long been weighing on the Belizean community.[1] Throughout the novel Belize is shown as a country still hesitating between its emerging national consciousness and a post-colonial outlook, a country caught between opposing but pre-determined visions of itself. It is in this socio-political context that the story of fifteen-year-old Beka is set. The warring allegiances at work in the country, frustrating the individual's quest for identity, are reverberated in the main protagonist of the novel, one of the best examples in Caribbean fiction of the dialectic relationship between the individual and society, between the child and its community. Politics and community life are much more in the novel than a mere backdrop for an individual lifestory. They are the inner landscape of every individual, of every child in Belize society, and Beka's quest for a viable identity, for a consistent self-image, reflects a collective undertaking.

The apparent starting point of the novel is Beka's winning of an essay contest at her convent school:

> On a warm November day Beka Lamb won an essay contest at St. Cecilia's Academy, situated not far from the front gate of His Majesty's Prison on Milpa Lane. It seemed to her family that overnight Beka changed from what her mother called a "flat-rate Belize Creole" into a person with "high mind" (1).

This opening of the novel initiates a series of oppositions through which Beka is going to try and thread her own way — the school vs. the prison, "flat-rate" *vs.* "high mind," what seems to her family an "overnight" change vs. what might be going on underneath. The point is however that this opening is a fake one since the beginning of the novel is in fact its end, the whole novel unrolling in an immense

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[1] Between the moment when British Honduras obtained autonomy (1964) and that of its independence (1981), a series of political squabbles and negotiations developed between Great Britain and Guatemala who, because of the Spanish colonial history of British Honduras, claimed it had inherited from Spain the control of that small country. An agreement was finally signed in 1981, then suspended, then confirmed again in 1986. The political party often alluded to in the novel (the People's Independence Party) is a hardly disguised replica of the political party of the time, the People's United Party, led by George Price.

flash-back. The real opening of the novel occurs a few pages later when the reader realises that fifteen-year old Beka must have gone through a period of hardships that changed her thoroughly. In a short lapse of time, a few months, Beka had to live through the deaths of two people to whom she was close: her maternal great-grandmother, Granny Straker, and Beka's best friend, seventeen-year old Toycie, who committed suicide when she discovered she had been made pregnant by Emilio Villanueva, a boyfriend not exactly willing to acknowledge any responsibility. The novel is structured around the two deaths. But whereas the mourning for Granny Straker takes the traditional form of a wake kept by the whole family and community — the ninth night being devoted to a meal and feast, traditionally aiming at protecting the living from the dead — no wake is kept for Toycie, except the one organised by Beka herself in her own memory, and by the narration itself. These two deaths and wakes are subtly intermingled in the narration since the former is contained in the latter — Beka remembers the wake for her great-grandmother as she is holding her own private wake for her friend. Let us examine from closer up those two parallel and contrasting wakes, both needed by Beka in the construction of herself.

When the funeral of Granny Straker starts, people are well aware that she was one of the few left "of the old people that remember things from the time before" (62). The whole community participates:

> Anyone could spare the time, stopped whatever they were doing to watch the funeral go by. It was a custom. It was important to know who had died, under what circumstances, to whom the person was related, and who the mourners were following the hearse, and why they felt the need to attend this particular funeral. There were few events that commanded the total attention of the community as much as a passing funeral. . . . In a way it was a small lesson in community history (62-63).

When the ninth and last night of the wake is being kept, family and neighbours gather together to the sound of music and the taste of food and drink. Anancy stories are told to adults and children, the dead are remembered and talked about, in a kind of get-together of words and senses.

In *Beka Lamb* two contrasting attitudes are held towards the wake, and it is interesting that Beka should need both in order to construct herself. Miss Ivy, Beka's maternal grandmother, on the one hand, favours such events as wakes on the ground that it helps the community to stay close together. It goes along with the fact that Miss Ivy, who is extremely active on the political scene, is the character who best makes Beka feel and understand how one is to prevent the fragmentation of the individual as well as the splitting up of society. The wake is one of the possible means at her disposal. On the other hand, Lilla, Beka's mother, is reluctant to see Beka involved in such events as wakes, claiming they were Christians and did not need to protect themselves from the dead, asserting also that "the old ways will poison the new." (66) Through those two characters, what comes here to the surface is the whole debate about the necessity to abide by traditions in a modern society. The wink of the writer is to show Lilla and Beka in the following chapter taking part in the wake along with the other members of the community…

Beka's position before and during the wake is extremely significant of her position in the community as well as of her self-image. In fact it is not up to her to decide whether she is going to the wake or not: her mother makes the decision for her. Then at the wake itself, she seems to have much more the position of the onlooker than that of participating member of the community. All along the few pages describing the wake, it is striking to see to what extent Beka stands in the background, as if she were dissolved in the group. Beka's status as a child (etymologically, *infant*) makes her appear as somebody who is talked to or talked about, but who does not enjoy a voice of her own. Beka's inner picture is incomplete, and feeling she belongs to the community is not enough to make it whole. Another *awakening* has yet to take place.

In fact, her presence/absence at the wake of her great-grandmother underlines the possibilities that are left open to her: she can either adopt and reproduce colonial values, thus negating her belonging to the Belizean community and past (as her mother's temptation seems to be); or she can adopt her grandmother Ivy's ideal of a new national

community, taking into account past traditions; or still she can try and evolve her own conception of reality and self, thus finding an identity of her own. But this she won't be able to do before she finds a solution to overcome the flaw that is ruining her life: her habit of lying.

Indeed Beka is almost addicted to lying, as if it were the only means she had found so far to reduce the conflicts between the public and the private world, to disengage herself from a text that has previously been written for her. By building up lies, she tries in fact to establish her own script, her own story against a pre-written history. Once she is aware of the necessity to eradicate that habit and find other ways to circumscribe her being, she will be guided by all the members of her family who, each in their own way, will help her find her own place in the world. Her grandmother will stress the need for a certain agreement between the individual and society, her father the need for each individual to see their rights respected and her mother the need to coincide with oneself. It is not haphazard if it is just before Granny Straker's wake that Lilla Lamb talks to her daughter and offers her a key to get out of the prison she has built for herself, to explore her inner world — she offers Beka a pen and an exercise book:

> "Well, every time you feel like telling a lie, I want you to write it down in there and pretend you are writing a story. That way, you can tell the truth and save the lie for this notebook. And when we tell you stories about before time, you can write them down in there, too, for your children to read" (71).

By this gift Lilla makes her daughter see that it is up to her to migrate from the lie to the story and from the story to the truth, that everything is connected: it is up to Beka now to transform her disembodied self into a narrating self who could say *I* and feel true to it beyond the fiction. Both the ritual of the wake and the stories in the notebook point to the same necessities: unite past and present, accept the community's history so as to be able to accept oneself and write one's own story. It also reminds Beka as well as the reader that it was also what Granny Straker wanted to teach the young girl — how to feel one with the natural world and hence the human world:

> "There's no need to be so delicate about gusting that chicken, Beka! You and that chicken are made from much the same thing. Push your hand into the hole and pull everything out. You are the earth and the earth is you, and there is nothing so dirty on or in it that you can't try to clean. Just as long as you wash your hands with strong blue soap after" (63).

It is such a philosophy which encourages Beka, as the wake is going on, to slip into Granny Straker's room, fall asleep on her bed, and later answer the questioning adults: "the scary things she was afraid of were not in Granny Straker's room" (78).

The dialectic of the difficult integration of the individual, and particularly the child, in the surrounding community can be felt throughout the novel. The desire of establishing oneself as one/self, mingled with the fear of being alienated from one's community, is perceptible in the very first pages of the novel when Beka's dream is related (beginning of the second chapter) — the bridge over the creek is being swung so as to give sailboats a passage from the sea; Beka has been hurrying, desperate to reach Northside:

> It was too late. The bridge, shuddering beneath her feet, began turning slowly away from the shore. Back and forth along the narrow aisle she ran, stopping again and again to shout and beat on the high iron wall separating the main traffic line from the pedestrian aisle. But the rattle and the creak of machinery, and the noise from both sides of the creek, prevented the operators behind the wall from hearing her voice (6).

Simon Gikandi in *Writing in Limbo* analyses this dream as signifying "Beka's anxiety at being displaced from her culture; . . . cut off from her people by the bridge; . . . this anxiety of selfhood [being] directly related to the community's fears about its own destiny as a nation" (Gikandi 221).[2] With no alternative route being offered to her, Beka feels isolated and even deformed: "She felt shrunken except for her head which had grown to the size of a calabash" (7).

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[2] The chapter entitled "Writing after Colonialism," dealing with Merle Hodge's novel *Crick Crack Monkey* and Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb*, is particularly enlightening.

If the traditional wake kept for her Granny Straker and the notebook given by her mother have enabled Beka to start solving some of the social codes and conflicts that were tearing her apart, something more is however needed to complete the process from a fragmented, disembodied being to an identity she can come to terms with. In the novel, the wake for Granny Straker is in fact contained within the mental wake that Beka is keeping for her friend Toycie, all its meaning coming to the surface thanks to Beka's remembering. She is indeed piecing herself together, a vivid example of the necessity of *remember-ment*, so appropriately underlined by Wilson Harris.

For Toycie, nothing comparable to Granny Straker's wake: she was raised by her aunt Miss Eila who, after eking out enough money to send Toycie to school, could certainly not afford to pay for a wake:

> No wake had been held for Toycie, not even one night's worth. Miss Eila had explained to [Beka's] Gran that times were too hard to hold a proper nine nights for Toycie, especially as Miss Eila didn't belong to a lodge or a syndicate. Miss Ivy offered to pay for the food, but Miss Eila's refusal had been strong.
> "Toycie would not have want me to put misself in Poor House over wake, thank you all the same, Miss Ivy," she'd said (5).

Beka feels it's not fair, neither for Toycie nor for the people who knew her and are still alive: she "felt that a wake should have been held for Toycie, at least a remembrance in the privacy of Beka's own heart." Beka's adventure and progress in self-definition starts when she finally sits down and decides to keep her own wake for her dead friend, thus gathering the threads of her own dispersed being:

> She decided to sit there and wait until her Gran returned from Battle-field Park and try to remember everything that had happened to her from April past, when she had failed first form, until today.
> ....
> "That is the only way, Toycie gal," she muttered to herself, "I can continue keeping my wake for you" (16).

The narration from then on (that is to say from the fourth chapter) covers Beka's tracks from April to November, but in fact

mostly to August, when Toycie realised she was pregnant and had to interrupt her studies at St Cecilia Academy, thus underlining the link between knowledge and self-possession. And we have to notice that it is no coincidence if the fact that Toycie might be pregnant is suggested on the final day of the wake for Granny Straker... Instead of merely including the act of memory in the ceremony of the wake, Beka devotes all her energy to it, not leaving room for anything else. The act of retracing Toycie's steps and her own, the act of groping inwards, enable her to accept the loss of the loved object, but also to integrate it within her own psyche so as to accept to go on living on her own. She has to lose Toycie as a part of herself so as to find her again, and herself at the same time. As in any traditional wake, Beka will finally accept to relinquish what has disappeared, thus discovering what is to be gained. She will also be able to see Toycie as the child she was herself and can no longer be. She will then be ready to celebrate a new understanding of herself and the world — and it is worth remembering that she starts her wake for Toycie's death as she is waiting for Miss Ivy, her grand-mother, to come back from one of her political meetings in Battlefield Park, thus pointing to the strong correlation between individual story and collective history, between past traditions and future evolution. Thinking and remembering help her to sort out the jumbled events of her recent past, and to let a certain logic and order emerge.

On her way to world-acceptance and self-knowledge, as she sits thinking about Toycie, Beka will be helped along by the comparison she can make between her friend's destiny and her own. Contrary to Toycie who lived in a single-aunt family, Beka realises all the advantages of the strong sense of community that pervades her family, of the different role models offered to her. And it is as if her wake were bringing all her loved ones closer around her. If Toycie does not have a father or a mother to identify with or rebel against, Beka can boast of and rely on a family that is already a microcosmic community in itself, even if somewhat idealised — she is raised by both her father and mother under the same roof, which is not particularly characteristic of the Caribbean *modus vivendi*. When confronted with the deepest crisis in her life, Toycie's death, it is thanks to the support of her family that she finds the strength to face it and give birth to a new individuality in its own right.

Where a mother is cruelly missing in Toycie's universe — the girl goes as far as saying: "I'd feel better if she were dead" (59) —, Beka's mother helps her along in the way that was already mentioned. Where a father is utterly absent for Toycie, Beka's father goes and talks to Sister Virgil in St Cecilia Academy, pleading in favour of Toycie and of all the girls in her situation when the seventeen-year old girl is expelled from school because of her pregnancy. There are as many memories of abandonment in Toycie (and Emilio's comes as the latest one on the list) as there are of support in Beka. Toycie is first presented as the more solid, the brighter, the more mature. But it is her story of disintegration that will open Beka's eyes and that will make her aware that childhood is over.

It may be worth noticing that this is precisely the theme around which a short story by Lorna Goodison is structured. "The Dolly Funeral" is only four pages long but it is powerful enough to leave a long-lasting imprint on the reader's mind (Goodison 7-11). Contrary to *Beka Lamb* which relies on a third person narration, the short story is told in the first person: a young girl narrates different games she used to play with her friends, and one game in particular, invented by the leader of the group:

> One day, towards the end of the summer holidays when it seemed we had run out of new games to play and that Bev's reputation for inspiring leadership of our group was beginning to pall, Bev came up with the idea of the Dolly Funeral. She proceeded to kill one of her less attractive dolls, by wringing its rubber neck, and placing it in a shoe box on her bed... "She dead," said Bev in a low voice, "we going to have to bury her." For two days the doll lay in the "dead house" as Bev referred to the shoe box, her life all bubbled out in clouds of pink and white foam, while we prepared for the Funeral (8).

The preparations for the funeral follow, and the funeral itself two days later, with all the trimmings — the procession, the lowering of the box into the earth, the psalm from the Bible, the singing... But on that very day, the narrator's mother had forbidden her daughter to leave the yard — so the little girl just sneaked out. The weight of the forbidden deed and the dread of the punishment to come spoilt the whole

event: "Even as I read [Psalm 1], I imagined myself beneath the ground in a simple wooden box because my mother was surely going to kill me when I went home. She didn't. My father almost did" (10). It is the end of childhood that is allegorically staged through the ritual killing and funeral of the doll, thus putting a metaphorical fragment of the child's body into the earth.

Beka Lamb needed two wakes to bury her childhood — the ritual accompaniment of her great-granny, and the private *rememberment* she carries on for her friend. She had to let her memory and imagination trace back their tracks. A similar pattern can be found in Olive Senior's short story "Ballad" (Senior 100-34), in which a young girl tells her own story in the first-person after the bereavement caused by the death of Miss Rilla, one of the two people in the world she really loved. Miss Rilla, a marginal Indo-Caribbean woman, not being considered worthy of the community's respect, will not have a wake kept for her. Lenora decides, just like Beka, to celebrate her friendship and care for her with a private wake, in the form of a Ballad:

> When Miss Rilla die I wish I could make up a Ballad for her like they do for famous people in the old days. Dont ask me why only when we sing ballad song in school I get sad and think of Miss Rilla. But I cant sing or play guitar and nobody make music round here since that Blue Boy gone away and beside this whole thing too deep and wide for a little thing like a Ballad. So I will just tell you the story of Miss Rilla and Poppa D, Blue Boy and me though is really about Miss Rilla (100).

Lenora, just like Beka, is also caught up between conflicting social codes and aspirations — the woman who is raising her, one of the women with whom Lenora's father had children, keeps telling her to forget about education and to learn sewing instead; Lenora's teacher and Miss Rilla on the other hand both encourage her to follow the path to book knowledge. It is however the same teacher who, after asking his class to write a composition about "The Most Unforgettable Character I Ever Met," will contemptuously discard Lenora's three pages about Miss Rilla. Confused, just like Beka, as to the gap between what she is taught and what is expected of her, Lenora will try to solve those conflicts and

make her own position in the community less painful — she concludes her reflection by saying: "I dont care if I dont turn teacher with press hair and new dress. I believe it better to be someone that can laugh and make other people laugh and be happy too" (134). It was Miss Rilla's wish to see her little *protégée* turn teacher, and her generous laugh was the most unforgettable feature in her character. So that, by saying those words, Lenora has perfectly achieved the function of the wake, be it physical or mental: she has put the necessary distance between the dead loved one and herself while retaining the aspect that can be most positive for her, at that precise moment in her life.

Finally it has to be underlined that through this mental performance, Lenora and Beka come to a new awareness of themselves and the world they live in. For Beka, this awareness is also reached through the different levels of the narration itself: the semi-oral one for the threads she gathers around her dead friend and herself, and the written one for the tales she keeps in her notebook. And not to be forgotten, the third-person narration itself which puts Beka on the way to self-identification, as if she was not ready yet for the first-person narration. The double detour through the past and the third-person narration are the only possibilities for Beka to reconstruct a viable identity and give the world the shape it had been deprived of after the bereavement she suffered. Only those detours will enable her to restructure her being and recompose the image in the kaleidoscope, so as to be able later on to use her own voice.

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