

On Colonialism, Psychiatric Disorders and the Guyanese Academic: An Interpretation of Jan Lowe Shinebourne's "Jacob" from *The Godmother and Other Stories*

Abigail Persaud Cheddie

University of Guyana, Turkeyen Campus, Greater Georgetown, Guyana

Abstract- *In this paper, I provide an interpretation of Jan Lowe Shinebourne's short story "Jacob" by situating it amidst two other similar literary cases and contextualizing it with Frantz Fanon's ideas about colonialism and psychiatric disorders. I analyse Jacob as a Guyanese academic whose loss of his usual 'consciousness', when he comes face-to-face with an academic edifice in England, can be accounted for by the anxieties he developed through having a "colonised personality". To support this idea, I provide a catalogue of Jacob's memories and reflections and examine how the workings of these suggest that the most plausible reason for his mental breakdown is the interplay of his academic endeavours and variables of his colonial background.*

General Terms- *Shinebourne; Guyana; Colonialism; Psychiatric Disorders; Academia*

Keywords- *Guyanese Academics; Scholarships; England; Mental Breakdown; Godmother and Other Stories*

1. INTRODUCTION

Jan Lowe Shinebourne's short story "Jacob" from her collection *The Godmother and Other Stories* takes us into the discourse on colonialism and psychiatric disorders experienced by Guyanese academics. Jacob, a gifted Guyanese musician moves to England to advance his skills at playing the piano but his story continues not in a music hall but in psychiatric wards. Jacob's story is reminiscent of Lorna's academic journey in Lowe Shinebourne's *The Last Ship* and Lloyd's struggles in his studies in "The Bats of Love" from Mark McWatt's *Suspended Sentences: Fictions of Atonement*. In each case, a Guyanese travels to England to 'advance himself' academically but winds up in a psychologically unstable state.

On one end of the spectrum of psychological instability, there is Lorna who, though functional, becomes increasingly detached from herself as she owns an academic identity imposed on her by others, while on the other end is Lloyd whose violent war between his academic persona and his anxieties appears to force him to take his own life. Somewhere in the middle of the spectrum is situated Jacob, who in the end does not succumb entirely to an eclipse of self but who never really seems to emerge from the academic limbo space that he has come to exist in. These disturbing fictional accounts have several things in common: they all involve young brilliant talented Guyanese moving to England for a revered tertiary education but becoming extremely debilitated once they get there, albeit a debilitation that appears to have started out as an experience of discomfort in their own homeland. These three accounts are among many other stories, both fictional and 'real' current stories, in which Guyanese academics appear to be navigating

feelings of inferiority about the limitation and perceived 'poorer' quality of tertiary education available in their once-colonized-third-world homeland. In addition, they seem to experience an intense pressure of acquiring a foreign education in order to 'ascend' to a more conventionally acclaimed strata. All three of the characters – Lorna, Lloyd and Jacob – win scholarships to study in England, Guyana's former colonizer; all three have varying degrees of success, but ultimately, neither of them ends up holistically at peace or psychologically stable. Lorna never completes her degree in England and her existence and function in both Guyana and England are ambiguous: "Joan [Lorna's sister] wondered whether her mother was still clinging to the idea that Lorna would one day return from England and fulfil her dreams of success, though as the years passed, she had ceased to speak of Lorna in this way" (Lowe Shinebourne, *Last Ship* 125). Altogether, Lorna never appears to develop a firm grasp on who she is or who she wants to be, in fact, the only ontological stance she seems to take is an ambiguous one as demonstrated in her attempt to choose a hippie lifestyle. As for Lloyd, he suffers a breakdown and is "taken to the psychiatric ward of St. James's hospital in Leeds for observation. [And] Within weeks he was back home in Guyana" (McWatt 209). Similarly, Jacob says: "I spent all my six years in a London nursing home among English patients, nurses and psychiatrists, then they sent me home, to this hospital in Georgetown, Guyana" (Lowe Shinebourne, *Godmother* 26 – 27). All three of these characters evidently have something in common – they are Guyanese scholars whose attempts to navigate their studies amidst colonial dynamics prove psychologically debilitating, which seems to suggest an inextricable link

between a history of colonization, education and fragile psychological conditions.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon suggests that mental disorders are repercussions of colonial war: "...for many years to come we shall be bandaging the countless and sometimes indelible wounds inflicted on our people by the colonialist onslaught" (181). Though Fanon's chapter "Colonial War and Mental Disorders" references cases in Algeria with very violent content, and I do not in any way suggest an equal comparison between his observed cases and that of the literary characters in this paper, I propose that Fanon's work evokes serious thought on the repercussions of colonial war, and by extension, provokes further reflection on how the effects of colonial dynamics are psychologically far reaching and can be applied to the Guyanese academic's experience. In each of the three literary cases described above, the Guyana-England relationship and the colonial overtones constructing it cannot be ignored. What is more, is that though the characters themselves do not always seem consciously occupied with the dynamics of a colonial/post-colonial society, their existence in colonized/post-colonial Guyana automatically thrusts them into a space that mentally destabilizes them on their academic journeys.

Though the 50 plus years of Guyana's Independence have seen much modification of the educational landscape, it is still evident that the largely colonial conditions existing before these 50 years still influence the curriculum and its outcomes, and more so the attitudes of the people towards education in Guyana. In such an educational landscape, I feel that Guyanese academics struggle in an unconscious war against an old framework and conventional expectations and their current realities. In each of the stories, scholarships to England were regarded highly, and in 21st century Guyana, because of tertiary limitations, scholarships are still regarded thus. However, in either outcome – winning one or not qualifying for one, or not being able to pursue one – there are psychological repercussions. While a lack of scholarship or foreign education suggests that the academic has had no 'superior formal training' and sidelines him into a group of perceived locally trained mediocre academics, the winning of a scholarship conversely suggests the ascension into a privileged group, in which the awardee bears the responsibility of representing his people and fulfilling their expectations, as is seen in Lorna, Lloyd and Jacob's cases. Either way, the academic is at war with the dynamics constructed by colonialism. Note here that I am not suggesting that a foreign education is inherently negative, but rather that the repercussive feeling born out of colonial experiences – the feeling that First World or Western education is by default superior, while in contrast a Guyanese tertiary education, however undefined it is, is limited and insufficient, is cause for concern. For many academics, the fear that they have no choice but to leave Guyana in order to achieve a higher and more socially acceptable and impressive education seems to form a psychological backdrop for how people in the academic

community operate. Sometimes, the decision to physically move away has grave psychological effects. For Lorna,

...She missed home, especially the food; it was too cold and damp; the scholarship money was not enough to live on; she could not afford to buy warm clothing; the hall where she lived was chilly and over-crowded; she was always ill with colds, flu and asthma, and England had given her bronchitis too. In short, she was miserable and hated England. (Lowe Shinebourne, Last Ship 113)

This passage describes the intense desire to come home to Guyana, but the 'colonized academic'¹ cannot be viewed as ultimately successful on his own landscape, either by the old colonizer, by his own people and also devastatingly true, even by himself, if he comes home without his foreign education. About this ideology Jacob remarks: "In colonial days, a man who went to England was Christ in the virgin's womb. Returning home, he was Christ born" (Lowe Shinebourne, *Godmother* 26). In *The Last Ship*, "Women in the shop joked that Mary [Lorna's mother] was behaving as if Lorna was going to England for her coronation" (107) and Lloyd's mother sets up walls of photos, certificates, a newspaper clipping of his formal academic achievements (McWatt 189) like a shrine dedicated to a saint. Jacob, Lorna and Lloyd are poised to become saviours of their Guyanese people, since it is believed that full salvation cannot come from within the Guyanese educational system. The academic then undoubtedly finds it difficult to manage himself as a player in what might be deemed the game of academic imperialism, and so he eventually suffers psychological effects of an academic condition fashioned by colonial constructions.

Fanon, in reflecting on the condition of the Algerian landscape, says that "The truth is that colonization, in its very essence, already appeared to be a great purveyor of psychiatric hospitals" (181). As a point of observation, two of the academic characters – Lloyd and Jacob – end up in psychiatric hospitals. In his same train of thought, Fanon establishes a link between colonialism and psychological instability: "...when the sum of harmful stimulants exceeds a certain threshold, the colonized's defenses collapse, and many of them end up in psychiatric institutions....a constant and considerable stream of mental symptoms are direct sequels of this oppression [colonization]" (182). In Lowe Shinebourne's "Jacob", Jacob Paul's tumultuous relationship with his studies and the collapse of his defenses can be seen as a product of his "colonized personality." To analyse Jacob's academic

¹ A term that I have modelled after Fanon's term "colonized personality", where he says: "The defensive positions born of this violent confrontation between the colonized and the colonial constitute a structure which then reveals the colonized personality" (182).

experience, I will identify the things that he says he can and cannot remember and examine how the workings of his memory suggest that his psychiatric disorder is born out of his colonized condition. Specifically, I will pay attention to memories and reflections of Guyana, memories of London, and also the workings of memories and images of buildings and landscape and what these seem to suggest.

2. AN INTERPRETATION OF JACOB'S CONDITION

To begin with, Jacob's presentation of self is done through a series of memories or non-memories, clearly catalogued using a repetitive stem: "I remember the faces of..."; "I can't remember how he came to teach me..." (25); "I do remember that Mr. Sam died. I remember the funeral. I remember how his relatives dismembered his house"; "I remember above every other feeling..."; "The next feeling I remember is..."; "I remember travelling in..."; "I remember the music college..." (26). All of these remembering and non-remembering build a picture of Jacob's journey: of struggles with academic imperialism, of psychological threats as a colonized academic and of some degree of reclamation of self in spite of his condition.

Of his childhood in Guyana, Jacob says that he can only remember the faces of some main members of his family – father, mother, grandmother, "and a few others" (25). We learn of his ambiguous relationship with his parents, his mother's act of dragging him to Anglican church in a sugar sack and his hatred for "the noise of prayer", "muttered words [they] could barely speak, much less understand"; the "...praying for a King and Queen... [with the] tattered red, white and blue of the British flag" "flaying" in their faces (29). Later on he also reflects on Guyanese calling him Teach because of his suit and his speaking "the Queen's language.... the only language [he has] been taught to speak" (28). Other than these colonial references which he pairs with his family and his people, he cannot or will not remember other things about his childhood like the details of progressing quickly at his music – learning to play the piano, writing the exams and winning the scholarship (25 – 26). These technical and admirable aspects of his studies appear to have been secondary to his confounding experience as a colonized subject. It seems as if Jacob's mind recalls his most traumatic memories and forgets the in-between memories – the average every day ones. This erasure of 'standard' boyhood memories and the dominance of memories with colonial associations suggest Jacob's mental preoccupation with his colonized personality and how it makes him feel.

Perhaps one of his most vivid memories in Guyana is his music teacher's death and funeral and the dismantling of his teacher's house which he refers to as a "dismembering", as if the house were a body and it were being desecrated by irreverent hands. Most importantly, he has a clear memory of his teacher's piano being carted off

(26). This carting image appears again negatively when he describes psychiatrists as doctors who view people as "loads to be carted from ward to theatre, from theatre to ward, like earth on a donkey cart" (27). With the context of this second reference, it seems as if Jacob is seeing knowledge, skills and talent being unceremoniously carted off in the person of the beautiful piano, carted as a load into oblivion, not passed on, not shared, not developed, not praised, not remembered, not sentimentalized but transported like a 'mad' patient away from a landscape that cannot or will not nurture it. In a sense, Jacob sees himself and his academic freedom, like the piano, being carted off in a philistine fashion. The carting away and Mr. Sam's death signal a crucial moment of oppression for Jacob, as thereafter, when he cannot find another teacher in his home county, a priest suggests that the best teachers could be found in England (26). There, in the moment of the local pianist's death and the strong suggestion that his own competence 'deserves' a Western education, Jacob appears to be carted away and 'forced' to officially accept his status of colonized academic.

In London, once again the thing he remembers the most has nothing to do with his music studies. Instead, what he most remembers is "the feeling of cold", while "the second most prominently remembered feeling is loneliness" (26). In addition, he has memories of "travelling in the underground trains during the rush hour" and most importantly, he remembers the music college (26) – the building, not the music lessons: "I remember the music college, a formidable building with formidable paintings of formidable musicians. In every room and corridor, the paintings lined the walls. I can't remember learning music. I spent all my six years in a London nursing home among English patients, nurses and psychiatrists..." (26 – 27). This music hall reference is important, as it emphasizes Jacob's association with buildings – the music college aligns with Sam's "dismembered" house and later his own when he returns to Guyana.

Together, these three buildings – Sam's, his and the music hall and even the psychiatric wards (parts of a building) seem to loom up clearly in his consciousness. These buildings appear to be a reflection of his negotiation of his colonized personality. He describes the music college with the repeated use of the word 'formidable'. It seems as if, as soon as he arrives, the building looms up large and impenetrable before him, with serious and acclaimed English works of art of awe-inspiring musicians boasting their unattainable music. It is necessary to remember that Jacob's interest was classical music, a genre not originated in his homeland. In a sense, Jacob's choice of love of music already somewhat distances himself from himself. Note that it is not suggested here that the colonizer's music is inherently negative, or that the colonized should not appreciate or study it, but the emphasis rather is that the colonized shares a complicated relationship with it, because it is a part of him but was not created by him. In some regard, it is unattainable. The distance existing between the colonized subject and the coloniser's creation

generates unexplainable tensions. Perhaps it can be equated with the kind of stereotypical relationship shared by a stepchild-step-parent. Furthermore, there is no indication that Jacob ever gets to go inside the classrooms to engage in his lessons, for he states that he has been in psychiatric care for all of his time spent in England. Faced with the “formidable” building, with “formidable paintings” depicting “formidable musicians” Jacob suffers a ‘psychological faint’ in which he appears to go into a ‘psychological coma’ for six years. Might this reaction have been caused by terror, anxiety, a feeling of inferiority and incompetence fashioned by his colonial background? To use Fanon’s expression, plausibly the “harmful stimulant” of the edifice appears to force Jacob to exceed his threshold of anxieties born out of his colonial condition. It is almost inconceivable as to why the otherwise competent Jacob should freeze in the presence of the music college, where it might be expected that he would feel pride and excitement. But the music college itself is one more thing in a long line of aggressively acting stimulants. It represents a whole system of beliefs and a complete network of operations that have played a confounding role in his psyche since he was a boy. One of the first definitively harmful stimulants leading up to Jacob’s psychological illness is clearly that of the dismembering of Mr. Sam’s house, in which it can be surmised that Jacob appears to be seeing his own Guyanese people dismantling their small house of academic empowerment that existed on their own landscape. This dismembering of the local academic body displaces Jacob from his own ‘academic house’ into the formidable music hall in England that proves incompatible with him. When he realizes that the coloniser’s hall cannot house him – for he and they are simultaneously and paradoxically psychological worlds apart and psychologically linked but conflictingly so – he already has no house of his own and the limbo solution is to be confined to psychiatric wards. Having to confront the colonizer face-to-face, in the symbol of a building forces Jacob into a kind of dark stupor, a loss of consciousness, in which he feels as if he had never journeyed to England at all: “I feel I have never moved” (27).

The year he spends in Guyana on his return, appears to help him modify the workings of his consciousness. Towards the end of the story, we see the use of another house image and the contrast of the Guyana landscape with the English landscape functioning as symbols of Jacob’s psychological progress.

One scene that cements Jacob’s view of his experiences in ‘house’ images is the one where he feels “like a man standing at the top of a staircase wondering whether [he] should go down” (29). He says: Going to London was reaching the upper rung of that ladder, then I had a breakdown. If I climbed up a ladder, then I can climb down. I am climbing down” (29). Here there is some semblance of Jacob trying to go back down into his own consciousness, not the unconscious of his colonized personality, but a conscious existence being deliberately

constructed in the opposite ‘direction’ of his colonized personality. Perhaps he moves to a decolonized personality or perhaps to a healthier negotiation of an already owned ‘colonized personality’; it is unclear how these stairs should be interpreted, as the story ends in another kind of limbo space. But it is most evident that where ascent was formerly seen as positive, descent now is; whereas climbing up the socio-academic ladder makes him ‘unconscious’ and forces him into a psychiatric ward, climbing down makes him ‘conscious’ and provides him with an awareness that allows him to state his name and openly appreciate all the things that he likes.

There is some measure of resolution expressed in the form of the contrast between the English and Guyana landscapes and the contrast between the music college and the house to which he returns. The description of the Guyana landscape is detailed and vivid:

...I love these shady avenues. I love these trees. I love being in the shade then coming out of the shade and feeling the sun warm my body....I see light and sun. Here walking on the street I can feel the sun on my back. From today, I will be able to feel the sun on my back every day. The trees filling the avenue are beautiful with colour, beautiful in the shade or in the sun. The blue sky is beautiful too, full of beautiful white clouds. The light is pure. In this light, it is possible to see every colour that exists.... (29 – 30)

Emphasized here are his feelings of comfort and ease in this psychological space, evident in the very persistent repetition of the natural words: love, trees, avenue, shade, sun, light, beautiful, colour and the references to his body’s interaction with the landscape. This scene contrasts sharply with the sensations of coldness in London. And his house, which he knows, contrasts the formidable music hall: “I can make out the shadow of my house against the sky....The door unlocks easily and creaks open. Though it is dark I can find my way. Though the heat of the room pricks my skin, I feel comfortable here....I put my suitcase down and lie on the floor” (31). Here, Jacob finds a psychological space that unlocks easily for him; it is a space that is very malleable and accessible to his person in contrast to the impenetrable colonizer space represented by the music college – a house that was not his own. The darkness in his house seems to symbolize the beginnings of a new identity that will slowly be illumined. The intangible unformed darkness is not terrifying in the way that the very solid music hall was, rather, Jacob becomes unfettered and can find his way in a new and formless space. The dark space is fertile, almost like a womb, and he is reborn: “I put my suitcase down and lie on the floor” (31).

3. CONCLUSION

Though Jan Lowe Shinebourne's "Jacob" explores an academic's experiences set in Guyana's past, the concerns expressed in this story still echo live occurrences in Guyanese society. Jacob's story, situated amidst the stories of Lowe Shinebourne's Lorna and McWatt's Lloyd and contextualized by Fanon's ideas in the areas of colonialism and psychiatry, serves as a painful reminder of the dynamics of the academic landscape of Guyana and the interplay of the country's colonial history and psychiatric disorders. Through an analysis of Jacob's memories, it is possible to weave a link between his mental breakdown at the academic institution in England and his colonized personality. This connection is evident in how his mind blurs other memories but foregrounds those memories with colonial associations and the feelings of discomfort and anxiety accompanying them. The existence of this connection is the most plausible reason for his sudden and disturbing slump into a psychiatric disorder for six plus years. Ultimately though, it is heartening that in the end, Jacob manages to address and control the anxieties in relation to his colonial condition and his academic journey: "The Anglican school is still there in Berbice [Guyana]. Perhaps I can teach there" (29). Though his return is ambivalent: "...the space I live in defies boundaries and

time" (30); "Nothing has really changed"; "I am conscious it is a dream and therefore I expect nothing from it. No signs of hope or despair" (31), Jacob has managed to weave meaning from all the fragments of his academic journey that has been backgrounded by colonial variables and he succeeds in bringing himself into a new and stabilized identity, regardless of how 'fragile' it appears.

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Author's Biography

Abigail Persaud Cheddie teaches in the Department of Language and Cultural Studies at the University of Guyana.