

Meet Beka Lamb

Beka Lamb was written by Zee Edgell and published in 1982. The novel takes place in Belize while the country is in the midst of a cultural and social shift. Edgell peppers the story with breathtaking imagery and colors and offsets them with the cold realities of living in Belize.

The two main characters, Beka and Toycie represent the ongoing clash between the old and new ways of life; between what was Belize and what will be Belize. Edgell explores maturity, political, and social issues through the telling of Beka and Toycie's lives.

Beka and Toycie are best friends, classmates, and neighbors. Toycie, seventeen, has a stealthy relationship with a young man of a higher class. Toycie and Beka have both been warned of getting pregnant before graduation.

Pregnancy out of wedlock occurs frequently among young girls in Belize. Women are permitted to attend school. However, not only is the cost of education too expensive for many families, but once girls begin school, they face a different set of rules than the boys. Toycie becomes pregnant in the middle of her final year in school. She is expelled and not allowed to return because the school believes, "In cases like this, we believe it is entirely up to the modesty of the girl to prevent these happenings"(Edgell, p119).

Emilio, the father of Toycie's child, faces no consequences. He is not expelled from school. He will receive the education his wealthy family pays for, and when he graduates, a job that will allow him the freedoms that Toycie had anticipated. The money Toycie's aunt had struggled to save to pay for her education was wasted.

Toycie will follow in the footsteps of the women before her, like her aunt, Miss Eila, whom Beka's father said, "is a simple woman, like many of our women, in certain matters," (Edgell, p. 120).

Miss Eila lacks the means to provide adequately for herself and her family. Toycie will raise a child and struggle everyday to somehow earn a living. Early pregnancy contributes to the limited roles available to women. It begets a social cycle that girls like Beka must learn to swim against.

The majority of the characters in *Beka Lamb* are female. The story is told from a woman's perspective. Beka's mother stays home with the family. Beka and Toycie go to an all girls Catholic school where they are taught by nuns.

The lack of male characters stands out enough to know that the omission was intentional. The story illustrates the reality of the Belize culture. Male characters work or become educated while the women maintain the homes and earn what income they can. In the novel, the few male characters have at least one fault that turns the reader away. Emilio impregnates Toycie, but then will not marry her. Bill fails to show consistent affection to his family; he often seems uninterested or too busy.

The women who surround Beka influence her thinking and judgments. Interestingly, the women are politically well-informed. One would not expect the "simple" women to have interest in politics. While Beka respects her father, she does so partially out of fear and partially because she is supposed to.

Beka's respect for Granny is different. Granny knows more about life and about Belize than either Beka or her father.

Beka's ability to recognize this demonstrates not only Beka's maturity, but also her curiosity about and reverence toward the Belize culture.

The Lamb family is the only nuclear family on their block. Beka's father, Bill, has a white collar job in a country where traditionally men have held blue collar jobs. Beka's mother, Lilla wants the family to adopt Western ways and forget the old ways.

On several occasions she tells Beka's Granny to stop telling Beka about "before time". In the novel, much of the history of Belize comes from stories Beka recalls Granny telling. Bill and Gran Ivy sit on opposite sides of the political spectrum. Bill is looking to the future; he is ready for change. Gran Ivy goes to political rallies and wants to preserve the country's past. Beka lives in a politically and socially divided home. Her maturity allows her to ask questions so she can form her own opinions.

Beka's life changes with Toyocie's pregnancy. Until Toyocie became pregnant, Beka had lived a safe, predictable life. She had chores and she had arguments with her family, but Beka had not experienced *life*. Toyocie's situation forced Beka to face bureaucracy, isolation, and death.

Beka returns to school after Toyocie's expulsion and wins an essay contest. The self-doubts Beka faced her whole life start to recede. The pedestal Toyocie once stood upon is now vacant. Beka has not replaced Toyocie, but has begun to change what she sees on that pedestal.

The most touching part of the story is Beka's growth and

maturity. She begins as a fourteen year old girl who idolizes her older friend. At the end of the story she has become more focused, mature, and aware. Beka privately mourns for Toychie because she feels no one else has mourned for her appropriately.

As a freshman, Beka wins an essay contest that she thought she had no chance of winning. By winning the contest, Beka realizes that change is possible. She will not be stuck in the same poverty stricken cycle that Toychie fell victim to, but she will never forget the culture that molded her into the person she will become.

Social Insecurity in *Beka Lamb* by Zee Edgell

Since its publication in 1982, the Belizean novel *Beka Lamb* by Zee Edgell has received a great deal of international attention, despite its rather conventional subject matter and style. It is a "good read" for people of all ages and makes accessible to outsiders a nation and culture that is not well known. Critics, too, are gradually "discovering" the novel and explicating its contribution to current discussions of feminism and postcolonialism. Although the author denies any "political" intentions in her work (Interview), the book is richly provocative in its political implications. It may not speak to or take sides in current party politics in Belize, but it implies much about the power wielded in relationships involving gender, race, class and empire. I will focus on issues of race, class, and empire, since gender has been the subject of most other recent interpretations.

The social insecurity that Edgell dramatizes involves the ethnic threat that Creoles feel from the rising Hispanic population and the socioeconomic frustrations that Creoles undergo as they try to rise from lower to middle class status--all in the larger context of Belize moving from colony to independent state. Zee Edgell seems hopeful that, through proper discipline, Creoles can both regain their status in the Belizean ethnic hierarchy and also move from menial to more professional occupations--and without compromising too much their rich cultural heritage.

Full appreciation of such points depends on seeing that *Beka Lamb* represents the emergent nation of Belize. The author clearly encourages the association by pointing out on both the first and last pages that *Beka Lamb* won the essay contest on the very day that Gadsden and Pritchard were imprisoned for

sedition by the British colonial government. Both Beka's personal action and Gadsden and Pritchard's national action were turning points in corresponding drives for self-realization and independence. And both were of an equivalent degree--not final achievements but first steps leading toward fulfilment. Since history proves that the sedition of the 1950s led to Belize's attaining actual independence in 1981, we feel assured that Beka Lamb, too, will attain the mature self-possession that the end of the novel implies for her.

Of course, conflating a *bildungsroman* hero with his or her nation is not unusual in postcolonial literatures. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" is a classic example. Similar recent texts include Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* (Somalia), Joseph Zobel's *La Rue Cases-Negres* (*Sugarcane Alley*, Martinique), and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (India-Pakistan), to cite only a few examples. The natural metonymy of having the experience of an emergent child or adolescent mirror that of the emergent nation as a whole allows for both an absorbing psychological account of a concrete individual's experience and many teasing implications about larger political and cultural questions.

The full range of national political commentary in Edgell's novel also requires that we study Edgell's close association of Beka Lamb with Toycie. Toycie and Beka are schoolmates, neighbors, best friends, and tied into a kind of extended family by the intimate friendship of Beka's grandmother Miss Ivy and Toycie's guardian Miss Eila. In effect, Toycie serves as a foil, or alter-ego, for Beka Lamb. In place of Beka, Toycie acts out certain tragic experiences that Beka, fortunately, can be spared and can profit from by observing. Specifically, as a 17-year-old being initiated into sex, Toycie serves as a traumatic moral warning about such conduct for Beka, who at 14 is not yet

interested in boys (although her female relatives know she is on the verge). The most explicit identification of Beka with Toycie occurs near the end where Beka Lamb accepts the essay prize, knowing that Toycie would have won it if she were still alive. In the same way that Toycie acts out the worst possibility in Beka's life, so Beka acts out the best possibility in Toycie's.

With Toycie as an alter-ego for Beka and with Beka as an embodiment of Belize, the main problems of both girls suggest Edgell's analysis of the main problems facing Belize as an emergent nation and culture. Beka Lamb's main problem is lying. Toycie's main problem is sex and conception outside of marriage. No, Edgell does not mean to imply that all or most Belizeans are liars and fornicators. Rather, she uses these character flaws from the realistic story to imply deeper, more subtle things about larger, ingrained national problems. To oversimplify, Toycie's pregnancy illustrates the propensity in Belize toward economic disintegration and ethnic conflict. And Beka's lying is a metonymy for the general problem of authentic identity, whether in Beka as a person, the Creoles as an ethnic group or Belize as a nation emerging into self-hood following colonialization. Beka is "ashamed of herself and her people" and eventually perceives the "phoney" nature of her undetermined, immature, childish self (*Beka Lamb* 20). The novel dignifies these personal problems of adolescent girls--questions of identity and socioeconomic success--by regarding them as the most crucial cultural problems of an adolescent nation.

Social Class

Although the question of social class is clearest in regard to Beka Lamb, it is also graphically a part of Toycie's experience. Her pregnancy is more a socioeconomic than a moral issue.

Conceiving a child outside of wedlock has been a distinguishing element of traditional African-American culture in the Caribbean since the earliest days of colonization. The nuclear family is the exception in Belizean Creole culture. More typical is a mother and/or grandmother living with children or grandchildren and a number of other relatives. The father or fathers of the children come and go and contribute some or no financial support. In some analyses, this matrifocal system derives from slave-holding days when owners deliberately broke up nuclear families in order to make slaves loyal to them rather than to other slaves. In other analyses, it is a social pattern inherited from some native African societies in which a man may have numerous wives whom he visits on occasion (A. J. Brown 68). In Toycie's case, the family system has broken down with the disappearance of her unwed father to Panama and the migration of her unwed mother to Brooklyn, which leaves Toycie in the sole care of a poor, unmarried aunt who is ill-informed in sexual matters.

But, considering the overall scope of the novel, the breakdown of Toycie's family is not the main point. Edgell associates the nuclear family with the economically successful middle class and the traditional Creole matrifocal family with the poverty-stricken lower class. Both Beka and Toycie need to choose between a diploma or a baby- -that is, between socioeconomic success or failure. Without education--which means waiting for sex until educated and married--both Toycie and Beka Lamb are condemned to menial tasks in the kitchen or laundry (like

Eila), which means protracted poverty and helps account for the despair that leads Toycie to attempt suicide--exactly as in V. S. Naipaul's moving story, "The Maternal Instinct," where sexual restraint is also linked with economic success. The moral issue has essentially socioeconomic implications. Edgell seems to suggest that Belize cannot succeed as a mature, prosperous, independent nation until it develops the middle-class institution of the nuclear family.

If Toycie's family shows the failure of that attempt, then Beka's family illustrates a successful emergence out of the Creole lower class into the small Creole middle class. On both sides of Beka's family tree, her own family--Bill and Lilla's--is the only married nuclear family. In the maternal branch of her family tree are four informal sexual liaisons: Beka's aunt Tama lived with a "gentleman" in Honduras for fifteen years; her maternal grandmother conceived Tama and Lilla with a half-bakra bushman father, who is now living with a Maya woman in the bush; his father was an Englishman who fathered him with a Creole woman; and Great-gran Straker lived with a "gentleman" who was a woodcutter. Less is known about Father Bill's family, although near the end of the book Gran Ivy admits to Beka that "Toychie's first trouble caught me too, and I turned to rocking the cradle" (170). She gave up her own dream of success (joining the circus) and became a washerwoman instead.

How it was that Bill married Lilla and established a successful nuclear family is not entirely clear. We know only that he was already a hard, responsible worker at 14 years of age (28), and we see that the nuclear family fits Lilla's fascination with the fact that her grandfather was an Englishman. Her anglophile admiration for English expatriates and her rather pathetic attempt to grow English roses in Belize suggest that she has

appropriated other white cultural values, too, including the importance of a nuclear family.

The Lamb family is clearly an anomaly in Belize City--so much so that grocer Gordillo comments on how "lucky" Becca is to be living with both a mother and a father (39). The Hartleys are the only other Creole nuclear family on Cashew Street, and they are so much wealthier than the Lambs as to belong to another social realm entirely. When Becca makes an inventory of the Creole families on her street, she mentions five husbandless matrifocal households before Gran interrupts her (145). The fact that Becca's inventory comes as a reverie in the middle of her essay-writing suggests that she is obsessed with the possibility that her life may turn out like theirs and Toychie's--just as at Great-Gran Straker's wake she was horrified by Miss Flo's choking report that her daughter had just had her third child by her third boyfriend.

Propelling the social rise of this nuclear family is the hard work of Father Bill Lamb. One thing makes him significantly different from other Creole men of his class: He has been willing to overcome the traditional Creole male bias against earning a living by the "undignified" (82) means of trade or business. Educated Creole men aim at civil service jobs. Less-educated Creole men have not accepted agriculture or business as replacement occupations for seasonal woodcutting, which is now a virtually defunct occupation. To Bill's credit, he has been willing to surrender his cultural pride and serve his boss and their customers without "condescension" (82). To which Bill would add that he has been willing to "struggle" (21)--to work hard and long hours--beginning at Becca's age.

Bill's reward is that he has a white-collar job, membership in the Creole club, and is prosperous enough to next want a septic

tank and toilet and perhaps even to move to a better neighborhood (42). The foliage from their lot that breaks down their neighbors' fences is symbolic of their unusual prosperity, which makes their Creole neighbors "resent" them (41).

Thus Bill's family duplicates the archetypal experience of lower-middle-class families in other western cultures: by hard work and discipline they have raised their social status, although they remain keenly aware of the possibility that they might easily slip back into poverty. The American proverb, "From white to blue collar in one generation," haunts them. Beka's failing in school or becoming pregnant would be such a slip--perhaps back to the dreaded "kitchen work" (67) or "washing bowl underneath the house bottom" (2).

They may not be consciously aware of it, but the Lambs have abandoned some traditional Creole values in order to rise in society. Lilla grows English roses and Beka straightens her hair. In addition to his attitude toward business, Bill has also given up Protestantism (the traditional English faith) for Catholicism (the growing Hispanic-related faith). He has also given up his preferred holidays on the Sibun River, where traditional Creole culture thrives best, to holiday instead on St. George's Caye with the Blanco family. By such compromises the Lambs raise their status.

Edgell seems essentially to recommend the nuclear family, education and hard work within the dominant economic system as the necessary or best means of "progress" for Belize into the modern world. Although such capitalist, middle-class values may seem very conservative to liberal critics from the First World, they are, oddly, liberal innovations for a Creole culture that, in its family system, oppresses women and in other ways is ill-equipped to build a prosperous, free society.

Ethnic Relations

The question of race and ethnic relations within an independent Belize is a prominent theme in *Beka Lamb*, as it continues to be today, some 35 years beyond the setting of the novel.

A recent essay by a Belizean deals directly with the continuing problem of ethnic relations in Belize. In it, Francis Humphreys quotes Harriet W. Topsey's worst-case analysis: "Ethnic consciousness is leading Belize into an escalating ethnic war" (11). Assad Shoman's analysis is more realistic: "While it has long been the accepted wisdom that total racial harmony exists in Belize, the truth is that there is a considerable degree of prejudice and discrimination among, and even within [ethnic] groups" (11). Nigel Bolland is cautiously optimistic: "Real national liberation and human emancipation may yet be achieved in Belize on the basis of a national integration that respects racial and cultural pluralism" (11).

Humphreys' own solution for the problem is to educate Creoles and Caribs in their common African heritage. Wise though his approach may be, it deals with only one element of racial conflict in Belize--that between Creoles and Caribs. Although the Creole-Carib conflict is historically ingrained, it is a conflict within one racial group and, in the case of the Caribs, involves relatively few people. Edgell, too, mentions that conflict but does not dramatize it. Instead, she dramatizes the more recent, growing conflict between Creoles and Hispanics. This is a potentially more serious one for Belize since it involves two different racial groups that are also the largest ethnic groups in the country. In Hispanic vs. Creole the issue of race is also merged with a conflict over economic and political power,

which is less present in the Creole-Carib conflict.

Bill baldly states the problem to Miss Ivy: "Hatred of British colonialism unites us now. There are so many races here I wonder what will keep us together once they leave" (96).

Granny Ivy speaks the hopeful solution to Bill, who has just done his patriotic duty by eating the spicy Spanish food that she has prepared: "We'll have to get used to it, Bill. Don't you hear what the politicians are saying out at Battlefield Park? We must unite to build a nation" (150). How much racial unity does the novel imply?

The first review of the book by a Belizean, Fr. Charles Hunter, is explicitly aware of the persistent social problem and looks to the book--both hopefully and nervously--as a contribution to its solution. Seven times in his short essay Hunter refers to the "multi-racial" society of Belize. He implies that--but does not show how--the novel is part of the solution. Heidi Ganner sees in the author's attitude an "impartiality" toward other groups, despite her "leanings" in "favour of her own race." In *Bill and Lilla* she sees "at heart sincere supporters of a free multi-racial Belize" (90). Flockemann finds that, in the novel, "integration of some kind is held out as a possibility for Beka and her country" (46). Such vague feelings may indeed represent the intentions of the author. However, they do not mirror the intensity of the problem as depicted in the book, nor the problematic way the book resolves the problem.

Early on, the novel rather blandly announces its theme of ethnic conflict: "[Belize City] was a relatively tolerant town where at least six races . . . lived in a kind of harmony" (11) . . . "Each race held varying degrees of prejudice concerning the others" (12) . . . But "in times of danger, it was a tradition for all races to present a united front" (12). One notices immediately

a hypersensitivity in the author and her speech community to "difference," especially in referring to the six main ethnic groups in Belize as six different "races."

The seven groups that the book actually mentions could be arranged in the following order in terms of the way Beka's Creole group has tended to look at other groups. They are arranged, from top to bottom, from high to low prestige--and, not coincidentally, generally from light skin down to darkest skin:

Expatriates	-- white colonialists and other foreign residents
Bakras	-- white citizens of Belize
Creoles	-- mixed whites and Africans
Panias	-- mestizos (mixed Spanish and native Americans)
Maya	-- native Americans of Belize
Coolie	-- descendants of East Indian indentured servants
Carib	-- dark Africans with Carib Indian admixture

Beka Lamb dramatizes primarily the ethnic conflict between creoles and panias in the pecking order depicted above. In Gran Ivy's "befo' time" creoles indeed dominated the panias in sheer number of population, in educational level and in influence in national affairs, thanks to their English-language skills that made them the preferred group for staffing the colonial bureaucracy. Until recently, Spanish speakers tended to live in the districts -- especially Orange Walk and Corozal -- retain their native language and remain on the fringes of national affairs. With independence, with a creole out-migration to the United States, with the economic prosperity of mestizo cane-growers and fishermen, and with an in-migration of mestizos from Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador, the situation has changed, and continues to change.

The actual situation in *Beka Lamb* shows that as early as the 1950s, the setting of the book, the panias had already superseded the creoles in education and economic power. The point is made clear as early as paragraph three, where Beka recalls earlier predictions that "the prizes would go to bakras, panias or expatriates" (1). Clearly, in her educational career Beka is competing within a Spanish-Catholic school culture, which still operates the best schools in Belize City. And as one of the few creole girls attending the school, she is clearly the underdog.

Her father also lives his life as a subordinate in Spanish-dominated business culture. He has worked for Blanco since his teenage years. He is beholden to a pania for his livelihood, the vacation spot for his family, and the black car used for Great-Gran Straker's funeral. Two symbolic names given by Edgell to her Hispanic characters suggest this new ascendancy. "Blanco," of course, means "white," and suggests that the Hispanics represent a new aristocracy of the coveted skin color. Emilio's family name, "Villanueva," means "new estate," which again suggests a new establishment.

Fr. Hunter reads positive signs of racial harmony and integration in the fact that the Lambs live with the Blancos on St. George's Caye on holiday and that Mr. Blanco has a skiff named *Nigger Gial*. In actuality, those details are very sinister. Yes, the Lambs vacation with the Blancos, but as second-class citizens. They live below the house and cook in an outdoor kitchen, like servants, while the Lambs look at Mr. Blanco as a "deity" (51), accept gifts of food from Mrs. Blanco and watch the Blanco children play (separate from them) in their anklets and leather shoes. Spanish culture dominates Beka Lamb and her creole family in the same way that Mr. Blanco rides and drives *Nigger Gial* when he skims across the sea. The families

remain separated by "wealth, class, colour" (51), and the Lambs are in a subordinate position, beholden to the Blancos.

But it is in the development of the relationship of Toycie and Emilio where the Creole-Spanish conflict emerges the strongest and where Edgell clarifies its relevance to Belizean national and international politics.

Both Beka and Toycie know that "panias scarcely ever marry creole like we" (47), but Toycie nevertheless tries to "raise her color" (47) by believing in Emilio's promise to marry her. He "toys" with Toycie (Young), to her tragic destruction.

It is historically and politically symbolic that the impregnation of Toycie takes place in the cemetery located on St. George's Caye. St. George's Caye, of course, was the site of the naval victory in 1798 when the English buccanneers (=pirates) who had settled in Belize routed a small Spanish fleet trying to enforce Spain's territorial claims in Belize. It is this victory that Belizeans celebrate every September 10, National Day, and that has become ceremonially symbolic of Belize's independence -- first from Spain, nowadays from England. Following the Battle of St. George's Caye, Belize was a *de facto* property of England, despite continuing quasi-legal claims to the territory by Spain and Spain's eventual successor, Guatemala.

On the social level, Emilio's sexual conquest of Toycie shows how the Spanish now dominate and exploit the Creoles. Since the Creoles always identified with the English in the issues raised by the Battle of St. George's Caye, on the level of international politics the impregnation also acts out the fact that the ultimate political victory has now been won by Spain in the form of a gradually dominating Spanish culture in Belize. That same issue is at the heart of the overtly political

discussion urged upon the Lamb family by the political activist, Gran Ivy. She is a member of the Peoples Independent Party, or P.I.P., which is a thinly disguised version of the Peoples United Party, or P.U.P., which led Belize to independence and is still a major political party in Belize. Like the P.U.P., the P.I.P. is accused of accepting money from Guatemala in support of its political goals. Whether the fictional or actual political party ever did so is not clear, but the bias of the PIP/PUP toward Spanish Central America has always been clear.

That bias was former Premier George Price's answer to the important question: "Where does Belize's true identity and best future lie after independence from colonizing Britain?" The options in the book are clearcut. One is with the West Indies Federation of former British colonies in the Caribbean area. As proposed by England, such a federation would help preserve England's hegemony in the region and re-inforce English-speaking culture in Belize--despite the great distance that separates the former Caribbean colonies in geography, history and culture. Lilla and Bill, both anglophiles, clearly support the Federation.

The other option--embraced by Gran Ivy--is for Belize to accept and exploit its geographic destiny; that is, to take advantage of the economic potential of its being the only English-speaking country on the Central American mainland. Since that entails making peace with Guatemala's claims and establishing good cultural and economic relations with its Spanish-speaking neighbors, the risk is that Belize might in the process sacrifice some of its British culture, institutions and loyalties. In such a scenario, the panias will flourish and the creoles will be diminished.

Both in the 1950s when the story is set and in 1982 when the

book was published--and Guatemala was still threatening to invade--these were life-and-death issues, especially for creoles. Zee Edgell was uncannily prescient in dramatizing the future ethnic shift in Belize.

As Belize's "1991 Population Census: Major Findings" indicates, in 1980, just preceding independence and the publication of *Beka Lamb*, the Creoles still outnumbered the Mestizos. Creoles constituted 40% of the population; Mestizos, 33.4%. But by ten years later, in 1990, the proportions were dramatically reversed: Mestizos, 43.6%; Creoles, 29.8% (6-7). A major factor was out-migration by creoles (mainly to the United States) and in-migration by mestizos (mainly from Guatemala). The 1990 census showed that 82.4% of Belize's foreign-born population was mestizo (41.1% Guatemalan) (13). The figurative dominance of mestizos that Edgell depicts in *Beka Lamb* has now become literal, and is likely only to increase in the future.

Fortunately for creoles, however, since independence Belize's English-speaking identity has been somewhat stabilized by other influences. Membership in the United Nations has lent authority to Belize's independence, thus leading Guatemala to quietly abandon its territorial claim. What the novel does *not* anticipate very well is the dramatic increase in U.S. hegemony over Belize, thanks to the Belizean dollar becoming tied to the American dollar, Americans touring and investing in Belize, and air transportation links to the U.S. far outnumbering links with England, the Caribbean or even the Central American countries. The best token of U.S. dominance is that the largest out-migration from Belize is to the United States, with 85% moving there (15)--rather than England, Guatemala or Mexico, as one might expect. Thus far, the American influence (including satellite TV) supports the Creole/English tradition

despite the increasing population and socioeconomic influence of Hispanics. Edgell shows this nascent American influence in Toycie's mother's residence in Brooklyn and the influence of American sisters on Beka at St. Cecilia's School.

The rising threat by panias to creoles is implied by Beka's efforts in school against the Spanish-Catholic system and especially by Toycie's ill-fated fascination with Emilio. There are no happy resolutions to these ethnic tensions--certainly no integration or implied harmony. Toycie crosses out "Espana" and writes "Belize" in the guitar she received from the English woman. Beka rejects Gran Ivy's suggestion that she go to Mexico and study Spanish. Emilio and his mother, once friendly to Toycie and Beka, turn cold. Daddy Bill chokes on Spanish food. And Miss Arguelles, a creole, flaunts her arse in Father Mullins' face, screeching: "You are American but I know you have Spanish blood" (104) --cursing him thus at the very moment when Toycie is revealing her pregnancy to Emilio outside St. Joseph's Catholic Church. Creoles like Toycie suffer to the death. Creoles like Daddy Bill endure second-class citizenship. Only rarely, like Beka, do they win the contested prize.

Empire

Finally, what does the novel imply about the effect of colonization on the native? The empire is overtly present, of course, in the British government's conflict with Gadsden and Pritchett, whom they accuse of sedition. Becca clearly sides with her Gran- -and against her parents--in supporting Gadsden and Pritchett's resistance to colonial authorities. In equating Beka's struggle with that of Gadsden and Pritchett, Edgell makes it clear that she prefers an independent Belize to a colonized one.

The preceding discussions of socio-economic and ethnic problems in this paper are also contingent on the colonizing process: Creoles are poor because they have been exploited by the British; and ethnic conflict in Belize stems at least in part from colonizers' historic exploitation of ethnic differences to "divide and conquer" the natives.

As Evelyn O'Callaghan has pointed out, the colonial institution that most impinges on Beka's experience is St. Cecelia's Academy, operated by the American Sisters of Charity. According to O'Callaghan, "*Beka Lamb* focuses on women's experience and implicitly equates economic underdevelopment under colonial rule with the devaluation of black working-class women under an educational system run by American nuns" ("Edgell"). This indictment of St. Cecelia's is certainly apt in regard to Toychie, whose life ends in disaster precisely because the Sisters of Charity show her no charity in her desperate situation.

However, St. Cecelia's influence on heroine Beka is more subtle and ambiguous. In fact, despite its obvious limitations, St. Cecelia's actually contributes a great deal to her development into a Creole of "high mind."

The obvious limitations of the school, of course, are found in Sister Virgil and Father Nunez. Both are characterized as over-reacting to new situations in which they find themselves. Sister Virgil is over-zealous in strictly applying the rules of the academy to Toycie's pitiful situation. Her strictness may represent a public enactment of her essentially ascetic nature; her name of "Virgil," after all, suggests "virgin," as O'Callaghan points out ("Driving" 70). Or her strictness may be explained by the fact that "she's only just come" to Belize (87-88) and has not yet accommodated her principles to the cultural reality that surrounds her. The nickname that her fearful students give her -- "Mighty Mouse" -- suggests that she is not always or entirely the villain that she appears to be in Toycie's case. As we shall see later, at one point she speaks some of the truest, most important words in the book.

Father Nunez, too, has entered a new reality in which he over-reacts. Not only is he one of the very few priests drawn from the native population, but he was even ordained in Rome. Like many converts, he has become more pious, more zealous than his expatriate converters. His social insecurity manifests itself in a closed mind, a lack of understanding of others and a desire to shed his Belizean identity (89). He poses no particular threat to Beka, but in the novel he represents the truly "assimilated" native with a colonized mind. Edgell makes him seem more comic and pathetic than fear-inducing.

If St. Cecelia's is the incarnation of menacing colonialism, as

O'Callaghan would have it, then Edgell peoples the rest of the staff with surprisingly attractive, somewhat innocuous, and often very helpful religious people. Two seem to be merely idiosyncratic: Sister Mary Frances, a six-foot tall British nun, and Sister Mary Bernadette, an aged, half-crazed Irish nun who has spent twenty-five years in Belize. The other three move beyond the innocuous and become positive, active agents for change in Beka's life.

Father Rau, an American, responded to Bill's appeal for help and successfully persuaded Sister Virgil and Father Nunez to allow Beka to return to school, despite her heretical comments. He has "joking ways, a humble manner and an aptitude for persuasion" (92). The Mother Provincial surprises Beka by being a jolly woman who applauds Beka's folksong program, tells a funny story, seems eager to learn about Belize, and awards Beka first prize for her essay. As head of the order of Sisters of Charity, she embodies their essence -- and in Edgell's depiction it is an attractive essence.

But it is Sister Gabriela, of course, who represents the Sisters of Charity in bringing out the best in Beka Lamb. Gabriela--whose name suggests the archangel annunciator--encourages Beka to enter the essay contest, as a creative way of providing a more relevant education than the "London" curriculum does (94). An American, Gabriela even visits Beka at her home, admires the native Creole architecture of the interior and relates well to Beka's mother and grandmother. The "glint of disrespect" that Beka sees in Gabriela's eyes--and that makes her human, rather than merely a symbolic foil to Sister Virgil--brings out the best of Beka as a Creole: "in her best creole drawl" she declares her intention to return to school, thereby surprising Sister Gabriela and her mother and Gran. The topic of the paper that leads to Beka's success--the arrival of the Sisters of

Charity in Belize in 1886--is an odd one. Following the thinking of O'Callaghan and Bromley (13), Beka's pursuit of the topic could become just another way for the school to overcome her resistance and appropriate her under its hegemonic power, thereby creating a colonized mind in Beka.

Beka's work does, of course, make her a star pupil at St. Cecelia's. However, the way she carries out her research and the effect of her work upon Beka help her escape whatever colonizing intention the original assignment had. First, Beka learns a lot about history--not so much about the religious order but more about her own country, as the Mother Superior notes (165). Most important, Beka researches the subject not by consulting *official* sources, such as colonial newspapers, archives and books, but by interviewing Mr. Robateau, who was an eyewitness to the arrival of the sisters. In other words, she writes an alternative history by using *unofficial, folk*, native sources. In effect, her paper ends the novel in a manner opposite of the famous conclusion to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where the point of view suddenly shifts to that of the British District Commissioner and signals the beginning of African history and experience as viewed and written by foreigners. *Beka Lamb* ends with the history of Belize being written by a native and from a native point of view.

Beka's achievement places her in the ranks of other colonized subjects--such as C. L. James and Jamaica Kincaid--who say that they have used the substance of a colonial education ultimately to triumph over it (Birbalsingh 17, 147-48). Toychie is destroyed by her direct confrontation with the colonial system. Father Nunez cooperates fully with it and ends up with a colonized mind. But Beka finds a way to use the colonial system to develop the Creole "high mind" that her Gran so much admires.

The New Beka Lamb

Beka Lamb becomes a self-created, autonomous young woman by the end of the novel. Her identity -- and, by implication, the identity of the New Belize -- is complex and subtly drawn.

On the social level, one is impressed by Beka's apparent lack of friends at school and on Cashew Street, following Toycie's death. In Toycie's place, Beka makes friends only with a Mayan girl, Thomasita Ek, who is also an outsider at St. Cecilia's Academy. On a national scale, that friendship lacks much real significance, since the Mayas tend to be so culturally and geographically remote from urban culture that no true, longstanding ethnic conflict has thereby been bridged. As a political symbol, however, there may be more significance in Thomasita Ek.

For as Belize moved toward independence, the P.U.P. and transitional authorities chose the ancient Mayas upon which to construct an "official" national identity. Hence, the new inland capital city of Belmopan was designed in a pseudo-Mayan architecture. By officially celebrating the ancient Mayas, Belizean authorities both invoke the Mayans' glorious achievements as an inspiration to modern inhabitants of Mayan lands and also give national symbolic status to a cultural identity that all groups can accept--because both the ancient and modern Mayans are too remote from practical political issues to be any particular threat. At best, Beka's alliance with Thomasita Ek may indicate a similarly tentative, fresh start in the forming of new social patterns and alliances.

Most puzzling is Beka as a sexual being. Seven months into her fourteenth year and she still is not interested in boys! True, she vicariously rejects them through Toycie's experience with

Emilio. And on occasion she also contemplates her future as a married woman. At one point Gran Ivy slaps her face for declaring, "When I grow up I am going to marry a Carib!" (68). Later she tells her mother, "I'm never going to get married" (71). And last of all she says, "I'll never fall in love" (169). Psychologically, one can understand these declarations as Beka Lamb's own way of coping with the problem that destroyed Toycie--unmarried pregnancy. "Just say no," is her motto. Ironically, she obeys the sermon preached to her, in her father's presence, by the detested Sister Virgil:

We women must learn to control our emotions, Mr. Lamb. There are times when we must control whatever our feelings. . . . The women will have to decide for a change in their lives. . . . vulnerable. (120)

In placing the responsibility for pregnancy on the woman instead of the man, Sister Virgil may be "acting the patriarchal feminine as the agent of men," as Bromley (12) sees her. But in the fictional context her words ring true, proving once again that even the devil can speak the truth!

Beka Lamb becomes a kind of nun, by principled choice, whether or not she clearly understands the implications of it. She won her prize by writing an essay about the arrival of the Sister of Charity nuns in Belize. She has heard the Mother Provincial invite the girls to consider joining the order and becoming the first native Belizean sisters. And her best role model for educated womanhood is the American nun Sister Gabriela. Yet with Beka's disinterest in religious matters--and especially her heretical disbelief in heaven and hell--one assumes that a religious vocation is not what her shaping experience has prepared her for.

No, Beka at the end of the book appears poised to become a

"nun" in the service of her country. After all, her essay dealt with the history of Belize. She wrote it during National Day. She won the prize the day the seditioners were imprisoned. She has always wanted to be a politician, and practiced being such at the politics-laden St. George's Caye. As her most influential mentor, Sister Gabriela, put it to her:

You are lucky, Beka. You are being given advantages most young people in this country far smarter than you are not going to get. Therefore, you have an obligation to serve, a responsibility to produce under the most adverse circumstances. You must go as far as the limitations of your life will allow.

If she is not going to be a religious servant, perhaps she will be a national servant.

Like many first novels, *Beka Lamb* has a significant autobiographical element in it. Indeed, at the end of the book, Beka Lamb seems poised to become someone like her author, Zee Edgell. After graduating from St. Catharine's Academy (St. Cecilia's), Edgell studied journalism in England (Beka as writer) and then returned to Belize to work on a newspaper and later become director of the Women's Bureau in the government (Beka as politician). She later wrote this hopeful, politically suggestive novel and has participated in a number of international conferences on women and women writers (Beka as feminist).

For the problem of ethnic rivalry in Belize, Edgell suggests no clear, easy solution. Beka arranges a medley of Belizean folksongs for the Mother Superior's visit-- but their nature is not specified, and the only example given is Creole ("pinqwing juk me"). Edgell seems to advocate ethnic separation rather than integration, and multiculturalism rather than assimilation. Edgell prefers her own ethnic group to others, or

to a melting pot.

Beka's primary task seems to be to cultivate her own identity and that of her ethnic group. Perhaps after that has been fully achieved, she can contribute to solving the nastier ethnic and racial rivalries that surround her. At only 15 years of age, Beka has succeeded so well in her primary task that we may also be cautiously optimistic about the future of her newly independent country.

By the end of the book, Beka has transformed from "a flat-rate Belize creole" to a person with "high mind", since her troubles have forced her to learn the value of money, education, unity within the community and most of all, family

Beka Lamb

Summary

Beka's Story

Beka Lamb is the debut novel of Belizean author Zee Edgell. It is the story of both Beka and Belize, an adolescent girl and an adolescent country. Set in Belize in the 1950s, fourteen-year-old Beka struggles with growing pains complicated by the society in which she lives while her country struggles to move from colonialism to independence.

The novel opens with three seminal events. The young Creole teen, Beka, has just won an essay contest at St. Cecilia's Catholic school, Beka's lifelong friend Toycie has died (but the traditional nine-day wake has not been held for her), and two members of the Belizean Peoples' Independent Party, Pritchard and Gladsen, are imprisoned for disloyalty to the British government. These events symbolize the often painful challenge of coping with growth and change.

Narrated by flashbacks, the novel covers a period of seven months. While preparing for bed one night, Beka vows to "keep a wake" for her deceased friend Toycie "in the privacy of her own heart." As she reminisces about the past months "waking the gone," her story unfolds. Beka recalls that her life started to change the day she decided to stop lying. Her last lie was a big one. Failing three subjects, Beka had not been promoted to the next grade. Beka's parents are struggling to pay for her private education. Fearing their reaction to her failure, Beka tells them that she passed, naively believing that they do not already suspect the truth. Beka's lying habit is the most serious of the many conflicts she has with her parents. She does not clean the

attic properly, she throws garbage into the yard, she steals money from her father's pants pockets and she procrastinates with her chores. Beka's mother, Lilla Lamb, often complains about Beka's "laziness and ingratitude" to her husband, Bill Lamb, who then must discipline Beka. Beka seeks solace from her friend Toycie and her paternal grandmother, Granny Ivy, who shares a bedroom with Beka and usually takes her side.

In spite of these parent-teen conflicts, Beka does have a loving relationship with her parents. Her family is one of only two nuclear families in the community, and while her parents do not love all that Beka does, they do love her. Beka begs her father for a second chance at school, promising to pass this time, and Bill Lamb eventually relents. A nun at Beka's school, Sister Gabriela, takes Beka under her wing, encouraging her to enter an essay contest about Belizean history. Granny Ivy fears that Beka has no chance of winning any contest at "no convent school" because such prizes always go to "Bakras, Panias or Expatriates," but certainly not to a Creole girl. Yet Beka does win and the novel ends where it began, with the essay contest prize and a much bigger win for Beka – self confidence and hope for the future.

Toycie's Story

Beka's friend Toycie is seventeen, but she remembers what it was like to be fourteen. Beka is mature enough to "pretend seventeen" so the girls get along quite well. Both girls attend St. Cecilia's, Toycie at a great financial sacrifice to her family. Toycie is all that Beka is not. Abandoned by her unmarried mother and father, she is raised by her Aunt Eila. They are extremely poor, yet Eila works several jobs to pay for Toycie's tuition, knowing that education is the only way out of poverty in Belize. Beka and Toycie have been warned by the nuns about fooling around with boys and getting pregnant. Although

Toycie is an excellent student and Beka must struggle, both girls do not want to end up like many other Creole women with no education, no husband and the only job available being “the washing bowl underneath the house bottom” or worse, prostitution. Despite Beka’s warnings to Toycie that she might “wind up with a baby if you’re not careful”, Toycie continually sneaks away to meet with Emilio, a higher class “Pania.” Granny Ivy tells Beka that Toycie is “trying to raise her color” by being with Emilio. Beka cautions Toycie that “Pania scarcely ever marry Creole like we,” and when Toycie does get pregnant, Emilio refuses to marry her like he promised.

Toycie has been abandoned by her parents and her boyfriend and because she is pregnant, she is expelled from St. Cecilia’s, thus being abandoned by the church—ironically, the Sisters of Charity. Beka’s father Bill begs Sister Virgil to show charity to Toycie, reminding her that in Belize “people without resources have no strings to pull when their children get in trouble.” He points out that Emilio has not been expelled from his Jesuit school, but Sister Virgil will not budge. Losing all hope for a bright future, Toycie refuses to eat, becomes severely depressed, and jumps from a bridge into the sea. She is rescued by soldiers, miscarries the baby and is committed to the Belize Mental Asylum. Mentally unstable, she “imagines she’s at school and keeps asking when the recess bell is going to ring.” Miss Eila insists on moving Toycie to her brother’s home in Sibun River, a Creole community. Wandering off during a hurricane, Toycie is killed when a mango tree falls on her head and breaks her skull. Eila buries her right away, forsaking the traditional nine-day wake because of the expense, and it is then that Beka decides to hold her own wake for Toycie in her heart.

Belize’s Story (politics and ethnicity)

Beka Lamb takes place in the 1950s when Belize was seeking

its own national identity and often found itself “bruk down.” Would it continue to be a British colony, the only English-speaking country in Central America? Would it be taken over by neighboring Guatemala and reintroduce Spanish culture and language? Would it be possible for Belize’s mosaic culture to unite and become independent? There are seven groups identified in the novel from the Creole point of view: Expatriates, Bakras, Creoles, Panias, Maya, Coolie, and Carib. Not coincidentally, the whiter the skin, the higher the social order (Beck). The main cultural and political conflicts in *Beka Lamb* are between the Creoles (mixed whites and Africans) represented by Beka’s and Toycie’s families and the Panias (mixed Spanish and native Americans) represented by Emilio’s family.

Edgell skillfully weaves the history of Belize’s journey to independence into the stories of her characters. During the time frame of the novel, the Panias, who have traditionally favored Spanish control of Belize, have more economic and educational power than the Creoles. Granny Ivy is continually reminiscing about the “befo’time” when the situation was reversed. Bill Lamb has a rare white collar job, but his boss is Mr. Blanco, a Pania. The Lambs and the Blancos vacation together on St. George’s Caye every holiday, but the Lambs live below the main house and cook outdoors like servants. The Blanco and Lamb children do not play together and Mr. Blanco has a boat named “Nigger Gial.” Emilio’s parents both work for Mr. Blanco. Education in Belize is controlled by the holdover Spanish influence of the Catholic Church, so Emilio’s impregnation of Toycie represents the ultimate Spanish exploitation of Creoles. It robs Toycie of school and her only hope to escape poverty.

The Creoles have traditionally sided with the British for control

of Belize. Bill and Lilla Lamb are not happy with British colonialism, but they have come to accept it. "The British brand of colonialism isn't the worse we could have," Bill tells Beka. Granny Ivy is an important leader in the People's Independent Party (P.I.P.), an organization fighting for an independent Belize but espousing reconciliation with Guatemala. If the P.I.P. is successful, the Lambs fear that Creoles will have to forfeit some of the gains they have achieved by being the only English-speaking country in Central America. Lilla Lamb even tries to grow English roses in her garden and Bill insists that Granny Ivy replace the blue and white P.I.P. flags celebrating Independence Day with those of the Union Jack.

How can Belize reconcile these two cultures and politics? "There are so many races here I wonder what will keep us together once they [the British] leave," Bills tells his mother Ivy. She replies that they "must unite to form a nation"—meaning establishing good relations with Guatemala. So Bill continues to import Guatemalan coffee for Mr. Blanco and Lilla and Ivy attempt to "master the cooking techniques of every ethnic group in the country from Maya to Carib," even though the spiciness of the Spanish dishes burn Bill's stomach. Beka and Toycie cross off the words "Hecho en Espana" from Toycie's guitar and pencil in "Belize." Beka's winning essay is not only a turning point for Beka but also represents Edgell's hope for a future where Creoles can reclaim their status in Belize, train for more professional occupations and retain their rich cultural heritage.

Characters

Beka Lamb

Fourteen-year-old Beka lives with her father Bill, her mother Lilla, two younger brothers Chuku and Zandy and her Grandmother Ivy. She has some typical teen insecurities and rebelliousness, but she loves and respects her parents even though she does not always understand their discipline. Beka realizes that her family has more advantages than most of the other Creole families; plus, her friends and neighbors often remind her how lucky she is to be living with a mother and father, rare in the Creole community. Beka is well-liked by her community and is always ready with a smile. People remark that they can see “Beka’s teeth coming before any other part of her.” She has one good friend, Toyocie Qualo. Beka is not yet interested in boys and does not like Toyocie’s boyfriend, Emilio. Beka is curious and has a good sense of humor, but she procrastinates and is lazy about her school work. Her “fooling around instead of doing my work” causes her to fail three subjects and she is not promoted to the next level at St. Cecilia’s Catholic School for Girls. Beka aspires to be a politician and serve her country one day, but she must conquer school first.

Beka’s inner turmoil is representative of Belize’s turmoil. Like Belize, Beka is caught between the worlds of “befo’time” and “nowadays” and is constantly evaluating the characteristics of old versus new, accepting some and discarding others. She attends political meetings with her Granny Ivy but also questions her father about his political beliefs. Seeking her own identity often causes conflicts that she describes as a “tidal waves” in her mind. She straightens her hair and insists on speaking Spanish and wearing lipstick. This prompts her father to label her a phony, which she detests more than the beatings

she receives for lying. She tries to stay out of trouble at school, but when she announces her doubts about the existence of heaven and hell, Sister Virgil and Father Nunez suggest that perhaps she should not be educated in a Catholic school.

Beka continues to learn and grow with each of life's lessons but Toycie's tragedy is the most impacting lesson of all. Toycie's death not only strengthens her resolve to "never fall in love" but it also convinces her she must complete her education. Beka learns to channel her passion and intelligence and becomes a mature woman who can correct her mistakes. She blossoms into a self-confident young woman who is not even afraid to slip into her Creole dialect to make a point to Sister Gabriela while her mother smiles approvingly. Beka learns that she controls her destiny and with hard work, she will not be condemned to a life like that of the Coolie prostitute, National Vellor, who tells Beka, "No mother, no father, no school. What could I do?"

Toychie Qualo

Seventeen-year-old Toychie is Beka's best friend. Toychie lives with her maternal aunt, Eila because her mother abandoned her and moved to Brooklyn when Toychie was two years old. The Qualos are extremely poor but Beka does not realize it at first because she views everything from Toychie's eyes which "embellished everything with bright sparks of what she believed could be." Toychie is intelligent, talented, and beautiful. She plays the guitar and is helpful and well-liked by everyone. Toychie works hard at school, realizing and appreciating that her aunt must work several jobs to pay her tuition. Her unmarried aunt has failed to give Toychie any counseling about the dangers of premarital sex, however, so lacking any positive male influence in her life, Toychie is easy prey to Emilio's overtures.

As Toycie's relationship with Emilio intensifies and Beka decides to apply herself to her studies, the two girls drift apart. When Toycie becomes pregnant, her life is ruined. She is abandoned once again and does not even receive grace from the Sisters of Charity, who expel her from school. She loses the will to live, stops eating and eventually loses her sanity. She is killed during a hurricane when a mango tree falls on her and shatters her skull.

Granny Ivy

Granny Ivy is Beka's maternal grandmother. She lives with her son's family and shares an attic bedroom with Beka. She loves to tell stories about how things were in Belize "befo'time" and although she thinks most things were better than they are "nowadays," she is hopeful that "things can change fi true." She is politically active in the Peoples' Independent Party and is often at odds with her son over her support of this organization, which opposes British colonial rule. Granny Ivy is a role model for Beka, often siding with Beka in arguments with her parents. She confides to Beka at the end of the novel that she, too, became pregnant out of wedlock but she didn't "break down and die" like Toycie. She had wanted to train animals in a circus but she wound up "rocking the cradle." Unlike Toycie, however, Granny Ivy is not a victim. She tells Beka, "It's sad if you lost your virginity unmarried and to the wrong man, but if you lose it, you lose it. There's no need to degrade yourself."

Lilla Lamb

Lilla is Beka's mother. Lilla often complains to her husband about Beka's behavior and then feels guilty when he beats Beka. Lilla is a stay-at-home mother of three children, a rarity in the Creole culture. She respects her mother-in-law Ivy, even

though she does not always agree with her views. Lilla is genuinely concerned about Beka's development and remembers what it was like to be a girl. She consoles Beka that the scar left by her father's beating will fade with oil treatments and convinces her husband to allow Beka to hot comb her hair to straighten it, not to cross cultural lines, but because it is the style. She resists Granny Ivy's "befo' time" stories because she feels it will hinder Beka from looking into the future. Lilla encourages Beka to find her voice by giving her a notebook and a beautiful fountain pen with which to write down her "fictions." She encourages Beka to enter the essay contest, providing the final bit of advice that allows Beka to finish her essay. Lilla is a wise woman who tries to prevent her daughter from suffering the same indignities she endured as "the blackest and poorest one in my class." She urges Beka to "be strong like London with all those bombs falling." She has had only two years of high school and her husband has had none. This is not going to happen to Beka if she can help it.

Bill Lamb

Bill is Beka's father. Belize is a matriarchal society and the major characters in *Beka Lamb* are female, but Beka's father's is more than a mere breadwinner, as he often complains. "I have no say in this family," he protests. "I only provide the money." Bill provides more than that. He works hard to support his family and raise their level of existence. He works long hours for Mr. Blanco and his reputation for being a tough taskmaster has earned him the nickname "Wild Bill." He is the primary disciplinarian of Beka, even though he inadvertently hurts her with his belt buckle, after which he is immediately remorseful. He, too, believes in the power of education to improve one's station in life and gives Beka a second chance to succeed at school. When Toycie is expelled, Bill courageously confronts the nuns on her behalf, bravely entreating Sister

Virgil not to wait for change but to be “brave enough to make that change.” Bill becomes Toycie and Eila’s champion, directing Toycie’s hospital care and helping with her move to Sibun River. It is Bill who breaks the dreadful news of Toycie’s death to Beka.

Sister Gabriela and Sister Virgil

These two nuns are Sisters of Charity at St. Cecilia’s Catholic School, where both Beka and Toycie are students. They each represent an aspect of religion as viewed by Zee Edgell.

Sister Gabriela is loving and merciful. She is an encourager. She takes Beka under her wing. She is an American who has grown up on a farm in Wisconsin. New at St. Cecilia’s, Sister Gabriela is not as familiar with Beka’s history as the other nuns. Beka describes her as being “tremendous” in every way: “her large frame, her eyes, her gigantic nose, but especially her smile which made Beka think ‘With her, all things seem possible.’” Sister Gabriela recognizes something unique in Beka and encourages her to enter an essay contest, even though Beka does not believe she has a chance of winning. Sister Gabriela assures Beka that while it is possible for her to win, winning is not the point. She reminds Beka that she is being given advantages that most other Belizean girls do not have. Therefore it is her duty to make the best of it and serve her country. “You must go as far as the limitations of your life will allow” she tells Beka. Sometimes things only seem like they are “bruk down” when in fact, they are “not breaking down at all, sometimes things are taking a different shape.” She tells Beka she needs to change her attitude, try to recognize the difference and then “do something about it.”

Sister Virgil is assertive and uncompromising. She is the head nun at St. Cecilia’s. Unlike Sister Gabriela, she is a strict

disciplinarian. She is more concerned with enforcing rules than exhibiting charity and grace. She adamantly refuses to bend the rules at St. Cecilia's and allow Toycie to return to school after she has her baby. She coldly tells Bill Lamb that she believes it is up to girls to practice "modesty" with regard to boys. If they get pregnant, it is their fault. Bill Lamb's entreaty to her that Toycie "needs hope" falls upon deaf ears. She informs Bill that "women must learn to control our emotions." It is up to women to change their own lives. If they do not, they will remain vulnerable like Toycie. Her words are harsh, yet they ring true. By her characterization of these two Sisters of Charity, Edgell seems to be calling upon the church to exhibit both strength and mercy for the "long term development" of Belize.

Themes

Beka Lamb is a deceptively simple novel that touches upon the universal themes of human life—love, loss, sexuality, and community. It is set in a unique time and place—Belize in the 1950s. While the story of Belizean independence is unfolding around them, the characters struggle with friendships and relationships in a cultural milieu that represents these challenges on a greater social and political level. Narrated through the eyes of a girl maturing into womanhood, the novel explores the personal growing pains of the characters and the national growing pains of the country, offering hope that surviving such painful growth will ultimately redeem and strengthen both characters and country. *Beka Lamb* is a "coming-of-age novel" for both Beka and Belize.

Growth and maturity are important themes that manifest themselves through the novel's strong symbolism. Beka plants a beautiful bougainvillea bush that soon grows out of control and encroaches on her neighbor Miss Boysie's property. To keep the peace, Bill Lamb cuts it down. After Toycie's death

jolts the characters into the realization that they must unite and support each other to survive, Miss Boysie admits that she misses the bougainvillea. When a new sprout of hope appears, a trellis is built to brace the plant and encourage its new growth. During the storm that develops over Toycie's pregnancy and subsequent abandonment by Emilio and the church, a violent hurricane forces community members to seek shelter in each others' homes where they encourage each other while waiting out the storm. Everyone survives except Toycie who is killed when a mango tree falls on her. The replanting of the bougainvillea, therefore, serves "as a remembrance for Toycie" and a reminder to the community of what is necessary to achieve Sister Virgil's "long term development" of Belize.

As Beka struggles to establish her identity in her family and in her community, she learns that although one takes some steps forward and some steps backward in life, one must always be making progress. That forward progress, as Sister Gabriela advises her, is a direct result of her "attitude." So Beka must suffer the consequences of lying, yet she can learn to channel that lying into writing fiction in her notebook. She must pay the price for "fooling around" instead of doing her work by repeating a grade, but her reward is an education that can propel her out of poverty. She can grieve and hold a wake in her heart for Toycie, but she learns that for the present, a diploma is more important than a baby. She can eat spicy foods and speak Spanish, yet not forget how to use her "best Creole drawl." She learns to recognize that religion has both Sisters Gabriela and Virgil. She learns that life in Belize is a melting pot of Expatriates, Bakras, Creoles, Panias, Maya, Coolies and Caribs, but that they all have worth. By winning the essay contest, Beka has taken an important first step towards maturation. She proves to herself that what she had hoped could be true—that all things were possible—is true. Having

learned these lessons, she has changed from what her mother calls a “flat-rate Belize Creole into a person with high mind.”

Belize must also establish its identity. The theme of nationalism parallels Beka’s personal search for identity. Under the British Empire, Belize was called British Honduras. When the novel takes place, Belize was still suffering under the “befo’ time” scars of colonialism while struggling to move forward towards “nowadays” independence. But what should that independence look like? Colonial rivalry between England and Spain has existed in Belize for hundreds of years. Should Belize take advantage of its being the only English-speaking country in Central America and align itself with England and the United States? Or should Belize acknowledge its Spanish heritage and accept the territorial claims of Guatemala? This conflict is represented in the novel by Beka and Toycie. Toycie’s hold on things is slipping away as she clings to the Pania Emilio and lets go of Beka. There also is turmoil in the Lamb household. Bill and Lilla want Beka to look towards the future yet Granny Ivy encourages Beka not to forget the ways of the past, the ways that have made Belize strong. The imprisonment of the two men from the P.I.P. at the beginning of the novel is an important first step for Belize towards independence.

As things fall apart in Beka’s life, she tells Sister Gabriela that sometimes she feels “Bruk down, like my country.” Several times, characters express the idea that everything that comes to Belize breaks down. Granny Ivy tells of a circus polar bear that died because of the heat. Sister Gabriela tells of seeing broken down machinery that could not be fixed for lack of parts. Sister Gabriela, however, is of the same mind as Voltaire in *Candide* that “we must cultivate our own gardens” and tells Beka to “find some way to make it work, even if you have to

learn to make that part.” Beka learns to make that part and so must Belize. At the time of the novel, Belize is still looking for replacement parts, however. It was not until 1981 that it finally achieved its independence. Through Beka’s success, however, Edgell expresses hope for Belize’s future that one day its many cultures will come together and say, with Granny Ivy, that “everyone’s home is paradise.”