Dark child

The Dark Child: Characters The book “ the Dark Child” is the well written autobiography of Camera Laye, a boy who belonged to the Malinke tribe of French Guinea and grew up in the village of Koussaka. As a child, he experiences all the mysticism and rituals of his tribe, being initiated into manhood before leaving for Conkary the capital of Guinea, to continue his studies. Later, he receives a scholarship to Paris and the story details the young boy’s separation from his culture in an atmosphere of colonization, while also portraying the emotional link that he retains with his roots and the mysticism that he struggles to understand.

Two of the major characters in the book are his parents. His father is the village goldsmith, whose spirit dwells in a snake; “ No one was to kill him because he was my fathers guiding spirit!”(Laye 22). He is described as an “ open handed, lavish giver” albeit “ temperate”(Laye 20- 21). Laye portrays him as a great man, the man in whose footsteps he could have followed to attain a similar greatness, but for the fact that he opts for Western education instead. It is his father whom Laye turns to for guidance when he must choose whether or not to attend school in Conkary; “ What must I do if I am to do the right thing?” (Laye 29). His father tells him “ There is a certain form of behavior to observe, and certain ways of acting in order that the guiding spirit of our race may approach you also….. I fear, I very much fear little one that you are not enough in my company. You are all day at school.” (Laye 27). Laye’s ancestral heritage is replete with mysticism, charms and spirits, his father’s spirit is a snake, his mother’s a crocodile – each has an individual totem with which identification is complete. But young Laye is unable to find his own totem; “ yes the world rolls on…. and the proof of it is that my own totem…. is still unknown to me.” (Laye 75).

Laye’s grandmother is portrayed as the typical Universal grandmother, who loves him without question or reason, examining him every time he visits her and moaning about how thin he is. His mother is the strongest influence in his life – Laye shares a special relationship with her, awe struck by her supernatural powers. She is portrayed as a strong influence in the home; “ everything was done according to her own rules and those rules were strict” (Laye 68). She was authoritarian, unlike other African women who played a more submissive role and Laye states; “ It was due to the strange powers she possessed.” (Laye 69). Everyone in the community respected her. Mother and son share a strong bond, so that after the strange initiation ritual which Laye describes in full detail, when he had to be apart from her for three weeks, he is thrilled to be back with her. But an indefinable change has occurred, the umbilical cord has been cut and his mother welcomes him back as if “ she secretly wanted to proclaim that I was still her son and that my second birth had done nothing to alter that fact.” (Laye 134). Yet, as he grows older, he begins to resent the lack of privacy as his mother keeps checking on him and wishes that her love could be “ a little less jealous and tyrannical (Laye 173), especially as she resists his move to college in Paris; “ You’re not going!” (Laye 180). It is his mother who represents Laye’s link with his past, although his education pulls him so far away from it.

“ I was ambivalent” (Laye 148). As Laye enters the new world guided by western principles, he is rent by loneliness and confusion, although he has never been able to assimilate his native culture. He says that had it not been for his uncles, he would have been lonely and miserable in the city “ whose ways were foreign to me, whose climate was hostile and whose dialect I could barely follow.” (Laye 154-55). His Uncles Sekou and Mamadou with

their wives Awa and N'Gady are fond of him and take care of him as if he is their own child. They also introduce him to a beautiful girl, Marie who is a friend's daughter and Laye falls in love with her finding her beautiful with white skin and long hair (Laye 158). She represents a contrast from Fanta who was the childhood friend of his youth, whom he teased and bullied. Laye describes how he enjoys his visits to the sea with Marie, yet they cannot really substitute for the ambivalence that characterizes his life. On the one hand he longs for the land of his childhood and the love of his family and his clan, on the other hand he is unable to fully understand and appreciate that culture or be a part of it. His time in Conkardy and France is lonely and sad because he finds it difficult to integrate and belong in a strange culture and the differences that exist. Thus this story is all about the feeling of being lost and displaced – caught between two cultures and is a profound representation of the state of the mulatto in a colonized land. The two cultures are best symbolized by the characters of Fanta and Marie in the book. Fanta whom Laye teases and bullies, because girls are to be teased represents the African part of his culture where women are treated as inferior and Marie represents the western culture because she is almost white. Laye is eager to fit into western civilization, but his life is characterized by ambiguity and the longing for the security of his childhood – only it's too late for him to go back because he can never belong there, in the culture steeped in mysticism and belief in the spirits.

Reference:

* Laye, Camera.(1954). " The Dark child." New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.