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Belongingness And Identity: Contested Space In Andrea Levy's Small Island

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ABSTRACT

In Small Island (2004), Andrea Levy, an English writer born to Jamaican parents, looks back on the Caribbean migrants and their encountering the Britons in the Windrush era. A voice of the crossing, Levy wishes to insert her blackness on the English literary scene. The historical transatlantic journey problematizing identity formation – singular and communal – contesting prevailing account of Britishness is fictionalized but in a realist narrative. The complex multilayered structure of Levy's novel, with four discontinuous, criss-crossing personal narratives, offers distinct views along gender, class and colour lines. The proposed study, with an interdisciplinary approach, wants to analyze the varied socio-politico-cultural conditions in this text (and context) on the ground of immigrartion to England. Drawing significantly on postcolonial theory and diasporic dialectics, this proposed study attempts to explore the issues of alienation and assimilation, belongingness, contested space, and aims to show the securing of self-hood by the immigrants.

Keywords: Immigration, Blackness, Belongingness, Identity, Contested Space.

Introduction

I have crossed an ocean

I have lost my

tongue

from the root of the old

one

A new one has sprung. (Grace Nichols, 1992:87)

These lines of Grace Nichols are equally true to the Caribbean immigrants to England. Following the Caribbean tradition of George Lamming's Water with Berries and The Immigrants (1954) or Sam Selvon's The Lonely Londoners (1956), Andrea Levy belongs to a younger generation of writers to fictionalize the lived experiences of West Indian immigrants. Like Caryl Phillips and David Dabydeen, she is 'another voice of the crossing'. Born in 1956 in England to parents of the Afro-Jamaican origins, who were part of the Caribbean immigrants arriving in England on board SS Empire Windrush in 1948, Levy writes of black British people not as rejected outsiders but as critical insiders. In the words of Dabydeen, the ancestors "lie like texts waiting to be written" (Dabydeen, 1988: 14); so Levy wishes to 'insert her blackness' on the English literary scene.

In Small Island (2004) Andrea Levy presents England through the eyes of four London-based protagonists: two of whom are Jamaicans and two British. Levy here looks back on the 'Windrush generation', Caribbean migrants who sailed to the 'Mother Country' in 1948 in search of a better life. The black couple find themselves confronted and oppressed by the weight of their blackness, by prejudices and rejection at the hands of a white world they have been taught to regard their own. The proposed study, with an interdisciplinary approach, purports to analyze the varied socio-politico-cultural conditions in this text (and context) on the ground of immigrartion to England.

This study emphatically focuses on how the black consciousness is pitted against the Eurocentric configurations of the world. Moving back and forth in time as well as across national borders and cultures, the novel has competing claims on nationhood, belonging and culture. The paper takes the significant cues from postcolonial theory and diasporic dialectics (and, occasionally feminist theory also), and attempts to explore the issues of alienation and assimilation, belongingness and contested space. The study also addresses the intersection of gender, class, race and sexuality, and on an

emphatic note, finds out the issues of transcultural encounters. The paper also showcases the securing of self-hood by the immigrants despite the varied perplexing and paralyzing set-backs; it examines how identity is negotiated beyond the binary constructs of centre and margin.

From the world of the 19th century literature Levy was alienated in school; she failed to comprehend the codes of the literature of the centre. It was only in her mid-thirties that she understood, whilst reading The Women's Room by Marilyn French, that a work of fiction can change the way one sees something or the way one feels. As she then started writing, all her work, Levy declares, has been as a voyage of discovery from her position as a black British-born woman, 'both the child and the orphan of Empire', in which she has tried to explore and understand herself and the rest of her fellow human beings. (Greer, 2004: 4). Her previous writings [Every Light in the House Burnin' (1994), Never Far from Nowhere (1996), Fruit of the Lemon (1999)] is about the second-generation female protagonist's search for a voice, an identity and a space within the England of her birth which all too often fails to acknowledge her presence.

With her fourth novel Small Island (2004), Andrea Levy looks back on the Caribbean migrants and their encountering the Britons in the Windrush era. The author braids together the overlapping first person narratives of two couples, one black, who have just arrived from Jamaica, Hortenese and Gilbert, and whose lives become ineluctably entwined with those of a white couple from England, Queenie and Bernard. Levy's choice of first person narrative comes from the need to hear her characters' voices, to let them tell their own story, and to see the world from their points of view. She refuses to take a totalizing role; she says in an interview: "With Hortenese, I would sit up straight and imagine I was wearing Sunday-best hat and white gloves" (Levy, 2004).

Critics claim that Prologue in Small Island is the mirror through which the text unfolds. The Wembley 1924 Exhibition was nothing but putting the Empire on display in a miniature, to make the different races of the British Empire better known to each other. The very imperial ideology is inherent in the Wembley Exhibition. The child Queenie mistakenly says, "I

went to Africa when it came to Wembley." Soon she is corrected by the teacher, Early Bird: "You did not go to Africa, you merely went to the British Empire Exhibition as thousands of others did" (1). The perspective of childhood is important in the discourse of imperialism; 'the unformed child in need of nurture and discipline, is the unwritten book on which imperial ideology can inscribe itself' (Ashcroft, 2001:37). The countries on display do not exist as entities in themselves, but are reduced to consumption: "Woods of Burma … the coffee of Jamaica … the sugar of Barbados … the chocolate of Granada" (4) which only calls to mind Césaire's equation: 'colonisation: thingification' (1972). The child Queenie is guided by Graham, her father's apprentice who says about a black-skinned woman: "They are not civilized, they only understand drums" (5). Through the medium of exhibition, colonialism is portrayed as a 'desiring machine' (Young, 1996: 98). Then as she is confronted by an African man, whose 'lips were brown, not pink like they should be' and she is encouraged to kiss him, she is overwhelmed by irrational fear and nausea. But the African man said in clear English, "Perhaps we could shake hands instead" (6)? She to her dismay found that his hand was warm and slightly sweaty like anyone else's. Queenie's reaction and repulsion are childish; but the imperial language of the elders represents the black as the other, the savage opposed to the civilized – a stereotypical representation of black otherness. But these unfamiliar displays unknowingly instill into Queenie a desire for the other.

Daughter of a butcher, Queenie is sick of the blood, muck and stink, the sounds of slicing, chopping and sharpening in the butcher's farm. She leaves behind the barbaric world of her father's butchering shade, and goes to London to stay with auntie Dorothy, at whose death marries Bernard Bligh. At her husband's absence for years together, she is forced to take in coloured lodgers in order to survive no matter what the neighbours think. She enters into a relationship with Michael, a dark RAF officer. As she opens her door to him, she is 'lost in Africa again at the Empire Exhibition' (291). She is awakened to all the sexual desires that Bernard has failed to arouse in her, but also to the lure of exoticism that she experienced all those years ago. As Queenie finds herself with child after Michael

leaves without even a backward glance, she knows her world too has been turned upside down: "The war had been an enormous bomb blast. Everything thrown up, tumbling, turning and scattering high into the air. Now it was over; the whole lot was coming down to land. But it was settling in different places" (497).

But England is a place of dislocation for her lodger Gilbert, who is on his second visit to England. He finds himself confronted and oppressed by the weight of his blackness, by prejudices and rejection at the hands of a white world he has been taught to regard his own. Assailed by a mass of racist stereotypes, he finds himself banished to the margins, outside the imperial discourse of belonging, and made to inhabit a much vilified collective space which denies him individuality, and one in which the 'I' and the 'We' become interchangeable. Once the war is over, he is no longer in RAF uniform. He realizes how the uniform had made his coloured skin partly acceptable. Now he is only a darkie, moving from pillar to post seeking a job. The employer shows the reason – "You see, we have white women working here … All hell will break loose if the black man is found talking to the white woman". Even when he manages the job of a postman driver for the Post Office, then again the whites refuse to co-operate with him; they look upon him as a trouble and demand that "he go back to his jungle". As insult upon insult rain upon him, he knows he cannot retaliate lest he should lose the job; he ends up a broken man, crippled with shame; he can only stand "pitiful as a whipped dog" (315-318).

Having got the complexion of warm honey, as light as her father's, and not the bitter chocolate hue of her mother, Hortenese is convinced of a 'golden life' (38) or 'golden future' (72). She says, "England became my destiny" (100). Her vision of England, the Mother Country is the "mythic place of desire" (Brah, 1996). So strong her desire for England that she enters into a marriage of convenience, a 'business deal' with Gilbert, her best friend's fiancé, to whom she lends the money for his voyage to England. From the moment, Hortenese sets foot on English soil, she is met with total incomprehension: "I put on my best accent. An accent which has taken me to the top of the class in Miss Stuart's pronunciation class … but still this taxi driver did not understand me" (16-17). The feeling of racial

superiority drives the English to presume ignorance, backwardness and lack of sophistication on the part of the coloured. Hortenese is incensed by Queenie's presumptions of superiority as she haughtily declares, "I was a teacher and she was only woman whose living was obtained by the letting of rooms" (231). Surveying their shabby room, she complained to Gilbert, "Is this the way the English live?" (22) Having mastery over the Standard English language as spoken by BBC, and having two letters of recommendation as a proof of her proficiency in teaching skill, she is aspirant of obtaining a position of teacher. But 'the slap from the Mother Country's hand is all the sharper when she finds herself summarily rejected even without as much as a glance at her letters: "You are not qualified to teach here in this country" (454). Her awakening to the reality of the country is sudden and painful.

Posted in India Bernard champions the cause of the superiority of the British, and is a votary of imperialism. His generalizing the Indian population denies them a singularity and humanity. He says: "… Made me smile to think of that ragged bunch of illiterates wanting to run their own country, The British out of India? Only British troops could keep those coolies under control" (375). After some brutal retribution by the natives, an embittered Bernard, just out of prison and sexually taunted by British troops, violently assaults a young Indian prostitute. Shame overwhelms him for he feels he is a traitor to the standards of decency and 'civilized' behaviour that, to his mind, define him as an Englishman. After a voluntary exile, he returns to London unheroically. He cannot suffer a darkie on his street. He is yet to learn that his wife has been accommodating coloured tenants to make ends meet. Gilbert looks past Bernard and shouts 'Queenie, are you alright?' Gilbert has no idea who Bernard is. Bernard's shock is thoroughly understandable - a coloured man gate-crashing into his house, addressing his wife Mrs. Bligh by her first name---absolutely outrageous! Recovering from the bout of hysteria Queenie introduces the two men to each other. As Gilbert puts out his hand for a handshake, Bernard closes the door on his face.

Now, how would Bernard react to his wife delivering a black baby! That is quite unpredictable. The reaction, if it can be

called one, is described from Queenie's point of view. When Queenie describes the circumstances leading to the affair and the pregnancy Bernard is totally silent, but the silence vibrates with pain and outrage. But more surprisingly, when Queenie entreats Gilbert and Hortenese to take her son ad look after him, it is Bernard who rises to the occasion and even earnestly convinces Queenie that he (the child) has got a home; so why can't they themselves bring him up? In a short scene before it, Bernard fondly passes his finger to the baby to be sucked by him. Says Bernard, "He sucked like it was nectar. Quite content. Actually, he was a dear little thing." (509).

The vision of Queenie on bended knees begging Hortense and Gilbert to look after her child, turns up on its head the image of a proud little girl with the whole Empire at her feet at the beginning of the novel. It also destabilizes the Empire itself as Britain (which Queenie symbolically represents) is now seen on its knees. Queenie believes that she will not be able to provide for her child's needs in a society which discriminates on grounds of skin colour and which would only offer him a singular narrative of culture and identity: "I want him to be with people who'll understand…I've never seen a humming bird, not even in a book. Who'll tell Michael what one is like?" (521-2). Bernard's feeling of white superiority was a dream. Gilbert squarely presents the reality to him. In an admonishing, grandiloquent speech Gilbert says:

You know what your trouble is, man?...Your white skin. You think it makes you better than me. You think it gives you the right to lord it over a black man. But you know what it make you? You wan' know what your white skin make you, man? It make you white … Am I to be the servant and you are the master all the time? Stop this, man. Stop it now. We can work together, Mr Bligh. You no see? We must. Or else you just gonna fight me till the end? (526)

Like all the characters in the novel, Hortense knows that an uncertain future lies ahead but one whose hardships she and Gilbert are ready to brave, for they are survivors, as the last image of the novel so powerfully intimates: "I pulled my back up and straightened my coat against the cold" (530).

The post-war Britain, with the arrival of immigrants from the Caribbean has become a contested space where notions of belonging and identity can no longer be interpreted along fixed, linear narratives but are shifting concepts which allow for a plurality of world-views to interweave and engage with each other. Stuart Hall says in the essay "Minimal Selves":

I have been puzzled by the fact that young black people in London today are marginalized, fragmented, unenfranchized, disadvantaged and dispersed. And yet, they look as if they own the territory. Somehow, they too, in spite of everything, are centred, in place, without much material support, it's true, but nevertheless, they occupy a new kind of space at the centre. (pp. 44-46)

The writer, much in the vein of her immigrant characters, declares provocatively, "If Englishness doesn't define me, then redefine Englishness" (Levy, 2000). In it, she proclaims her desire to be English, to belong in England but she also refutes an exclusive view of an Englishness in which she can play no part, which does not represent her, or at times even fails to acknowledge her presence.

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