

Remaking Britain: The Afro-Caribbean Impact on English Literature

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Abstract

Nowadays, the Afro-Caribbean community is well-represented in Britain, and the metropolitan area of London is regarded as a global hub for diaspora minorities and multicultural races. A new generation of Afro-Caribbean writers, including Benjamin Zephaniah, the subject of this essay, along with a few selected other writers of African or Asian descent, have departed from earlier concerns by identifying themselves not as ethnic groups but rather as Britons. This contrasts with the majority of writers of African or Asian descent who explore issues of race, discrimination, identity, and equality. Hence, the study operates in two levels. It first seeks to highlight the growth of this new wave of Afro-Caribbean writers as a shaping cultural force in Britain. Second, it will emphasize how important their creative works were in reshaping England's literary canon in the aftermath of T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Hence, the research will demonstrate Benjamin Zephaniah's ability to identify as British and, as a result, his literary influence on English literature through the analysis of a selection of his poems and prose writing. Keywords: Afro-Caribbean, Benjamin Zephaniah, Black British writing, ethnic groups, culture, literary tradition, multiculturalism.

Introduction

Nowadays, the Black British or the people of African and Asian decent occupy a prominent position in the British society and the metropolitan London is considered as an international place for diaspora minorities and multicultural races. For many decades, the work of black British writers has been marginalized in the western culture and academic circles and even looked at in contempt out of racial considerations. Many black British works were ignored for being stereotypes that mainly present the Black British sense of discrimination, quest for identity, and struggle for equality. It has been recently in the last decades that a serious attention has been given to the literary production of these

ethnic groups where their literary writing is highly appreciated and recognized as a scholarly discipline. One can notice recently the introduction of their literary works in anthologies and how it is taught in universities under the umbrella of “Black British” literature rather than “post-colonial” literature, “Commonwealth” literature, or “ethnic minorities”. The black British writers or the new “Britons” as Bruce King states attach themselves to be identified as “English” meaning “British” where “it is only possible to study African, Caribbean, black British and other formerly marginal literatures”(2002, pp. 143-144). Many of the previous studies have tackled traditional concerns related to post colonialism such as racism, alienation, displacement, and quest for identity pointing out the poets’ struggle to define themselves to be either accepted or not accepted. The present study, however, seeks to highlight the transformation in the concept of identity of a few Afro-Caribbean poets who no longer care about the earlier concern of diaspora in terms of the notion of identity and acceptance but rather celebrate multiculturalism and their assimilation with the British. This new wave of poets has shifted the representation of identity from being “Black” other in earlier eras to being Black British and even “British” in present time. What differentiates these poets from other former Caribbean poets is their “celebration of cultural difference and fusion” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 1). The significance of this study, therefore, stems from considering the literature of this specific strand of black British writers, namely, the Afro-Caribbean writing nearly from 1990s who identify themselves not as an ethnic group but rather as British. Besides, the study aims at highlighting the Afro-Caribbean impact and literary contribution to the English literary tradition, an aspect that has been neglected in earlier studies since they were marginalized, if not totally neglected, culturally and literary. The present paper seeks to show that merging with the white British was not a problematic for them but rather a target they are seeking and being proud of. Sheila Sandapen elaborates the change happening in the U.K:

What is encouraging however, is the recent emphasis in the United Kingdom on regionalism, which might make the term Black/black British increasingly obsolete. For example, in a popular bookstore chain in Aberdeen and Glasgow, the Scots are proud to promote the writer Jackie Kay as a Scot and local writer and make no mention of the fact that she is a Scot with dark skin. Perhaps this emphasis on regionalism in part explains why Black British Literature is now becoming more palatable to the general public and in some cases even celebrated (2009, pp. 11-12).

This vigorous change is very promising for a bright future of the Black British and reflects their dynamic impact on Britain. Morag Styles and Beverley Bryan for example, label the Afro-Caribbean in a category that fuses them with the British: “Caribbean British Poets” (2014, p. 67). This categorization signifies the shift in the representation of identity and the ongoing recognition of them culturally and literary.

It should be pointed out that the present paper will be limited to the Afro-Caribbean as a sub-group of Black British through the analysis of selected poems and prose writings of the Afro-Caribbean poet Benjamin Zephaniah aiming to prove the Afro-Caribbean power in identifying themselves as part of Britain and consequently their cultural and literary impact on the English literary tradition. The followings are divisions that will present the framework of the paper. It will first start with an overview of the Afro-Caribbean in particular and how they are different from the Black British followed by an account of their ongoing global recognition culturally and literary. This section will be followed by a brief biography of Benjamin Zephaniah as a representative of this new strand with a brief analysis of selected texts from his poems and prose writings to explore how he identifies himself as part of Britain and the impact of his work on the English literary tradition. This assimilation with the British will be supported by referring to other Afro-Caribbean writers and black British writers who share him the same perspective and help in the remaking of Britain and the conclusion will sum up the findings of this study.

The Afro-Caribbean: an overview

Since the present paper is mainly concerned with the poetry of the Afro-Caribbean as a sub-category of the Black British, it would be quite interesting to start with defining the nature of the black British literature in general. Tracy Walters (2004) in his essay "A Black Briton's View of Black British Literature and Scholarship" elaborates its nature stating its difference from that of the United States of America where the latter is another label for "African American Literature". Black British literature, he goes on to say, is:

Literature written by people of African descent who were both born and reared in England, literature written and published by expatriate writers from Africa and the Caribbean who published on both sides of the Atlantic ..., literature composed by authors who did not necessarily establish literary careers in England but published in England, and, lastly, literature written by people who are simply dark in color, such as East Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and other Asians, Near Easterners, and North Africans. (172).

Likewise, Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe (1997) define black British literature as "that created and published in Britain, largely for a British audience, by black writers either born in Britain or have spent a major portion of their lives in Britain" (10). The label thus applies to a kind of literature written by mixed ethnic races who were born or raised in Britain signifying all the non-white minorities in Britain. The present paper will be limited to the poets from Afro-Caribbean descent who were born or live mainly in Britain rather than those Afro-Caribbean who live in the United States, Canada, and other European countries. The term "African Caribbean" or "Afro-Caribbean":

when used in Europe and North America usually refers to people with African ancestral origins who migrated via the Caribbean islands. In the UK, this term is used inconsistently. Some researchers use it to refer to people who are Black and of Caribbean descent, others to refer to people of either West African or Caribbean descent. African Caribbean people have cultural values, which are different from other African populations in terms of language, diet, customs, beliefs, and migration history. ... The group African Caribbean is composed of people from a multitude of islands and the use of this term has been challenged (Agyemang et al., 2005, p. 1016).

According to Mike Phillips & Trevor Phillips (1998), the Afro-Caribbean are defined as:

A diverse group of individuals, shaped by a specific and peculiar history, moved by their own rational calculations, impelled by their own needs and ambitions; and linked together by the rich and complex history they now share with the people among whom they came to live (7).

Thus, in contrast to the other black communities, who were brought to Britain for slavery and who still imprison themselves in a fixed identity or suffer a double-consciousness, the latest Afro-Caribbean wave have no firsthand experience of any homeland other than Britain. They were either born or spent a major part of their lives in England, went under Eurocentric educational system, and thus feel connected to the British nation. It should be pointed out, however, that the Afro-Caribbean presence in Britain have reshaped the topography of England where a number of around 500 Caribbean passengers came in ship known as the "Empire Windrush" from the Caribbean to start a new life in England in 1948. Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips go on to elaborate this drastic change:

on 22 June 1948 the Windrush sailed through a gateway in history, on the other side of which was the end of Empire and a wholesale reassessment of what it meant to be British. Before and after this historical moment, even simultaneously, the same kind of arrival was occurring in various other parts of the world, ...we had come to a new understanding, both of ourselves, and of how Britain has developed in the years since the Windrush arrived. (1998, p. 6-7)

The offspring of these early arrivals are the representative of this new attitude who hail multiculturalism and diversity and do not feel alienated or displaced but rather confirm their assimilation into the British mainstream. Unlike Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, where the person is caught between two cultures, these late Afro-Caribbean writers do not suffer from this ethnic division or "unhomeliness", but fully attach themselves to the place they were once born or raised in for they no longer know any other place other than England. Homi Bhabha (1994) explores the concept of mimicry as a strategy used by colonized

subjects to negotiate their relationship with the colonizer. He argues that mimicry is a form of hybridity, which involves both imitation and subversion of the dominant culture. Bhabha writes:

Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate; those "disruptive, discordant or subversive" strategies which emerge as the 'effects' of the colonizer's strategies of power. (89)

This ambivalence of mimicry as a strategy of resistance involving both conformity and resistance to the dominant culture does not apply to the late Afro-Caribbeans who do not seek a control over the other but rather celebrate their fusion with the British. Caryl Phillips (2002) elaborates the radical cultural change in Britain is due to this new wave of writers:

While it was the pioneer generation of Caribbean migrants who helped to introduce Britain to the notion of postcoloniality, it is their children's and grandchildren's generation who will help Britain cross the Rubicon of the English Channel and enter the European age of the twenty-first century (282).

In short, the Afro-Caribbean impact is vigorous and dynamic which have contributed to reshape England, its culture, and literature as will be shown in the ensuing part.

The Impact of the Afro-Caribbean on English literature

The Afro-Caribbean presence beside reshaping the topography of England has reshaped the literary scene as well. It should be pointed out that the present paper will not provide an in-depth analysis of their literary works, but instead, outlines their on-going recognition in academic circles and literary scenes with few representative examples. It will focus on their presence in England and the consequences of their literary production and their contribution to the English literature. This recalls a very important quotation by T. S. Eliot (1972) in his famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" where he declares that any literary work that is really good affects the whole literary tradition:

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so, the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities (72).

From Eliot's perspective, the Afro-Caribbean writings today have contributed to the English literary tradition where their literary

productions “alter” and “modify” the whole English literary tradition. Their impact is pointed out by R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey (2004) who state that:

The neo-millennial generation of black British writers is, on the face of it, less embattled than their postcolonial parents and grandparents; and they are more sophisticated. Born in England or Scotland or Wales, often to racially mixed families, they do not write about their staying power because they are not the ones migrated. Britain, they affirm, is their country. They are now rewriting Britain's literary history as well as drafting its future"(3).

These new emerging voices have contributed to the British literary scene as emphasized by Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe (1997), who state that as “T. S. Eliot is the last great innovator in British poetry”, so “when the history of twentieth century British poetry comes to be written up, the black poets will be recognized for greatly enriching poetic expression through their experiments with orality and music” (85). One can sketch the literary scene after the decline of the British Empire. The list includes popular Afro-Caribbean poets who won prizes that reflects their success and global recognitions such as John Agard, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Valeri Bloom, Jean Binta Breeze, and Benjamin Zephaniah to name just a few. John Agard was chosen for the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry in 2012, Linton Kwesi Johnson was awarded The Golden Pen Award in 2012, Valeri Bloom was awarded an MBE for services in poetry in 2008, Jean Binta Breeze won a fellowship named NESTA in 2003, and in 1999 Benjamin Zephaniah was the poet Laureate of UK and in 2008 he was elected among a list of top 50 post-war writers. This proves their impact and recognition which is highly appreciated. Their writings, confirms Laurenz Volkmann (2008):

has become an integral part of many anthologies of the New Literatures in English. No anthology is without its representatives from the West Indies; Caribbean literature has been popularized, is appreciated by the academic world, and has won international acclaim in the form of prestigious awards and prizes, which in turn has stimulated an interest in many a discerning ‘common reader’ (245).

In his book *The Twentieth Century in Poetry: a Critical Survey* Peter Childs (1999), makes a brief summary of poetry anthologies showing that minor Black British poets were intentionally ignored in poetry anthologies. It was only recently that some “influential twentieth-century anthologies have generally been those that choose a small selection of emergent poets and argue that they constitute a new generation or a shift in poetic sensibility” (8). He also states that “there has been a recent growth in surveys such as anthologies of Caribbean poetry” (7). Keith Tuma’s *The Oxford Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poets*, for example, includes many Afro-Caribbean poets such as James Berry, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jean Binta Breeze, and

Benjamin Zephaniah. Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain's *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970* also includes poems by Afro-Caribbean poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson and Benjamin Zephaniah. *Black' British Writing* by R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey is a collection of essays that highlights the incorporation of the black British writing in the study of English literature. In an interview with R. Victoria Arana, she states the growing prominence of this new type of poetry: "some of the most dazzling writing coming out of Britain in recent times has been from writers the British call "black." ... I would have been remiss not to have become keenly interested in this new phenotype of British writing. I read everything I can get my hands on. I put the works on my syllabuses". (Ethelbert, 2008). In her selection of poets in *The Fire People: A Collection of Contemporary Black British Poetry*, Lemn Sissay (1998), limits the collection to some new emerging voices, "the raw, the fresh Black and British poets" (8), who are not yet recognized in an attempt to popularize them and introduce them to the publishing houses.

However, the recognition of the black British literary productions including the Afro-Caribbean is extended to an increase in the number of publishers in Britain which are concerned with publishing the works of the Blacks British in general and the Afro-Caribbean in particular such as Bloodaxe, a publisher that has a diverse range of poetry collections and has published several anthologies of black British poetry, including *Ten: The New Wave* by Karen McCarthy Woolf and *Voice Recognition: 21 Poets for the 21st Century* by Clare Pollard. Peepal Tree Press is specialized in Caribbean and Black British writing and has published several collections of poetry by black British poets. Other Publishers interested in publishing Black British and Afro-Caribbean literature include Penguin Modern Classics, Bloomsbury Press, Virago, Macmillan, Chatto and Windus, Jonathan Cape, Payback Press, and Cambridge Press. Linton Kwesi Johnson, for instance, is the earliest Afro-Caribbean to be published in the famous Penguin Modern Classics series in 2002. Moreover, Out-Spoken Press is an independent publisher dedicated to promoting poetry that challenges the status quo and has published several collections by black British poets. In addition, Burning Eye Books focuses on publishing spoken word and performance poetry and has published several collections by Black British poets. Nine Arches Press is committed to publishing diverse and innovative poetry and has published several collections by Black British poets. Wasafiri has introduced the literature of the Black British to an international readership highlighting their distinctive form and language. Besides these academic recognitions, Victoria Arana (2004) states that the symposium that was held on April 15, 2000 under the title "Teaching 'Black British Writers'" at Howard University "was the first fully fledged international conference to focus academic attention on black British writing as a scholarly discipline" (22). All these examples reflect their

recognition and hence their gradual transformations from the margins to the center.

Since they are already established and defined as a lively force in Britain today, Kwame Dawes (2010), a Ghanaian poet and critic, for instance, explains in his preface to his book *Red: Contemporary Black British Poetry* the reason for choosing this title for his book. He clarifies that the Black British poets have departed from earlier concerns where they mainly care about “defining Black British identity or announcing its presence and credibility in the literary world”. He confidently goes on to affirm that “they have now earned the right to produce” anthologies and like their white partners, they “are ultimately interested in the word and in the joy and challenge of making images and finding music through language” (20) which proves the new attitude of these late wave of poets as insiders and not outsiders.

Developed from oral tradition whether songs, chants, hymns, the Afro-Caribbean writing “is characterized by its variety and originality, qualities which have contributed to the invigorating effect it has had on English literature” (Bénédicte Ledent, 2009, p. 20). These poets do not limit themselves to the conventional English forms and the use of standard language like their predecessors, but rather innovate their poetic forms as well as their expressions. For example, one of their major contributions to the literary scene is what is called “dub Poetry” or “performance poetry” associated with poets like John Agard, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Lemn Sissay, and Benjamin Zephaniah. Their insistence in using Creole, conversational tone, code switching, calypso and reggae, hiphop, and black music, the Afro-Caribbean are capable of preserving their literary heritage and cultural experience and integrate it with the English literary tradition. This integration is elaborated by Christian Habekost who states that dub poetry:

functions as a connecting link between the “black” oral tradition and the “white” literary tradition. For Caribbean culture, it represents both the “African presence” and European influences. Consequently, its creative concept entails the notion of creolization, a fusion of African and European elements, resulting in an original and indigenously Caribbean cultural expression (1993, p. 1).

Mahlete-Tsige Getachew (2005) emphasizes the significant “linguistic innovation” of “hiphop” in the Black British poetry (340). Kadija Sesay (2004) also states the change in the English language itself: “the English language is itself being made over various ways in that “third space” that Bhabha has identified” (105).

One way of the Afro-Caribbean poets’ global recognition is that their writing appeal to a broad range of people by finding a balance between using language and expressions that are culturally specific and those that are more universal. While incorporating culturally specific

expressions adds depth and authenticity to their poetry, they realize that it is also important to use language that is accessible to a wider audience. One way to do this is to provide context or explanation for some unfamiliar expressions or idioms. This can help readers who may not be familiar with the cultural references in the poem to better understand the meaning and intention behind the language used. Aisha Spencer (2014), states that “Caribbean poetry has transcended boundaries and presented the Caribbean through a language owned, ... and uniquely produced by Caribbean people” (21). Beverley Bryan, Georgie Horrell, and Sandra Robinson made a project in 2011 about the responses of three groups of teachers from three different settings; Jamaica, the Eastern Caribbean, and the UK about the teaching of Caribbean poetry. The findings of the project on the UK teachers show that the majority of teachers looked at Caribbean poetry as dynamic and vital where they “believed strongly in the positive contribution to wider society” that teaching Caribbean poetry makes. The UK teachers also find “aspects of the course challenging, perhaps most particularly the concept of ‘nation language’ and the employment of Jamaican Creole” as well as the “environmental issues” (Bryan & Styles, 2014, pp. 102-104). Another way of appealing to a wider range of people is their focus on universal themes and emotions in their poetry. While cultural references and expressions can be important and meaningful, the emotions and experiences that they convey are often universal and can be understood and appreciated by people from all backgrounds. By finding a balance between cultural specificity and universal themes, Afro-Caribbean poets have created poetry that is both authentic and accessible. The following will reflect this new attitude of assimilating with the British through shedding light on selected writing of the poetry and prose writing of Benjamin Zephaniah as a representative of this new attitude

Benjamin Zephaniah and his identification with the British in poetry and in prose writings

Benjamin Obadiah Iqbal Zephaniah (1958) is a prominent Afro-Caribbean poet, novelist, and playwright, who established for himself a prominent position as a published author writing in England today, has made a significant impact on British literature. Born and raised in Birmingham to a Jamaican mother and a Barbadian father, Zephaniah was expelled from school at a young age and turned to poetry as a way to express himself. He moved to London at the age of twenty-two to reach a wider audience. Zephaniah has written extensively in various fields, including poetry, prose, and plays. His first book of poetry, *Pen Rhythm*, was published in 1980, and he has since published several more books, including *The Dread Affair: Collected Poems* (1985), *City Psalms* (1992), *Inna Liverpool* (1992), *Talking Turkeys* (1995), *Propa Propaganda* (1996), *Funky Chickens* (1997), *School's Out: Poems Not for School* (1997), *Wicked World!* (2000), *Too Black, Too Strong* (2001), *The Little Book of*

Vegan Poems (2001), and We Are Britain! (2002). Zephaniah's popularity reached its peak in the 1980s when he was shortlisted for the post of Creative Artist in Residence at Cambridge University and the Chair of Professor of Poetry at Oxford. He has also made numerous television and radio appearances. The Guardian has commissioned him to write Caribbean-accented doggerel, and his play Dread Poets Society was broadcasted by the BBC. Zephaniah's contributions to British literature have been widely recognized, and his works continue to inspire and influence other writers. Although many of his early works often explore themes of race, identity, and social justice, the present paper seeks to highlight eclectic writings of his works that hail multiculturalism and assimilation with the British.

As a dub poet, fusing features of reggae rhythm, verbal words, oral tradition, Creole and English language, tradition and innovation, Zephaniah's poetry as Eric Doumerc discusses "transcends racial and cultural boundaries as it is steeped in the very British tradition of doggerel and nonsense while playing homage to the Caribbean oral tradition in its various forms and guises (2005, p. 195). Nisha Mathew states that "The new representative poets of multicultural Britain" among whom is Benjamin Zephaniah "have broken the canon foregrounding the Black struggle for culture and identity" (28). Accordingly, Zephaniah in many of his writings asserts his sense of belonging to England and that he does not suffer from an identity crisis as the refrain "I don't have an identity crisis" emphasizes in his poem "Knowing Me": As I drive on poetic missions On roads past midnight I am regularly stopped by officers of the law Who ask me to identify myself. At time like these I always look into the mirror Point And politely assure them that What I see is me. I don't have an identity crisis. (2001a, lines 10-18)

It is obvious that the poet is "in a calm and self-confident position. He seems not to accept and perhaps even not to understand the necessity to express an identity complex or to protest against the conditions that could have caused it" (Dorchin, 2017, p. 169). This optimism is reflected in his reply in refusing OBE in 2003, where he states that "I'm certainly not suffering from a crisis identity; my obsession is about the future and the political rights of all people" (The Guardian, 2003). In "Black Whole" he rejects being non-European "I can't be a Non-European/ I am whole" (1992, lines 1-2). In his poem "No Problem" he also states that England is his motherland and that his best friends are white:

lack is not de problem

Mother country get it right,

An juss fe de record,

Sum of me best friends are white. (1996, lines 21-24)

Although the opening stanza of “A Picture of a Sign” reflects a very critical issue of England’s sense of discrimination, the poet confidently assures that this racist behavior of equating non-English with animals is not directed to him “nowadays”:

I saw a picture of a sign
It was a sign of de time
Saying,
‘No Blacks, no Irish, No Dogs,
“No Children, No Cats, No wogs,’ ...
Nowadays

Dem couldn’t leave dat message fe me. (1999, lines 1-5, 9-10).

In the concluding stanza of the same poem, the poet identifies himself as British who has a “British passport” where he wonders of all the people that the “British have fought” as if he does not belong to these minority groups. He highlights these groups by writing them throughout the poem in italics:

I saw a picture of meself
In me British Passport,
An me tink of all de people
Dat de British have fought,
Like ‘De Blacks, de Irish, de Dogs,
De Children, de Cats and de Wogs.’ (1992, lines 31- 36)

His poem “I Have a Scheme” includes many lines which also celebrate the fusion of the two cultures. With optimistic tone, the poet believes in a brighter future that will integrate the “white” and “black” together:

I see a time
When angry white men
Will sit down with angry black women
And talk about the weather, ...
And hundreds of black female Formula 1 drivers
Racing around Birmingham in pursuit of a truly British
way of life. ...
I am here today my friends to tell you

That the time is coming
When all people, regardless of colour or class, will have
at least one Barry Manilow record
And vending-machines throughout the continent of Europe
Will flow with sour sap and sugarcane juice,
For it is written in the great book of multiculturalism
That the curry will blend with the shepherd's pie
And the Afro hairstyle will return. (1996, lines 8-11, 38-40, 46-54)

With a sense of humor, the poet stresses the multiculturalism of Britain by using food as metaphors for "black" and "white": the Indian "curry will blend" with the British "shepherd's pie". This sense of assimilation with the British is expressed in his poem "The Men from Jamaica are Settling Down" as the title clarifies. The poem describes the journey of the Empire Windrush, a ship which carries the early arrivals of Caribbean into Britain. The poem historicizes the birth of this new wave of Afro-Caribbean and their evolution as "a new generation" in this land where they become the "leaders" and "homemakers" as he confidently says:

A new generation rose up from these fighters
A new generation wid roots everywhere,
A new generation of buildings an writers
A new generation wid built in No Fear, ...
They came from de sunshine to participate,
They are de leaders, they are de home makers
They have been upfront since their ship came aground, (2001b, lines 105-108, 124 -126).

This historical documentary poem reflects "the charm of Zephaniah's poetic vision" which "lies in the fact that his poems radiate positivity/optimism about human life amidst the anguish and misery" (George, 2018, p.3). The poem sums up the history of the Blacks' presence in Britain and consequently their contribution to the evolution of Britain as a multicultural nation. In "Carnival Days" he joyfully explains how his ancestors celebrate their Caribbean culture in Britain. The visual imageries in words like "see" and "glittering" reflect their ongoing growth in the midst of Britain. The kinesthetic imagery in "dance" symbolizes their move from the margins toward the "centre":

On days like these the elderly say
Astronauts can see us dance

Glittering like precious stones

On dis rocking British Cultural crown, (2001b, lines .47- 50)

In a hopeful tone, the poet predicts their fusion with the British as reflected in his words “Bring hope and truth and prophecy” (line 41). Likewise, “The London Breed” expresses the poet’s deep love of “London” as a place that unites all nations. This sense of integration is reflected in words like “melting”, “united”, and “breed”:

We just keep melting into one

Just like the tribes before us did,

I love dis concrete jungle still

With all its sirens and its speed

The people here united will

Create a kind of London breed. (2001b, lines 27-32).

This recurrent theme of cultural diversity and multiculturalism of Britain culminates in his poetry collection *We are Britain!*, as the title signifies. It includes thirteen poems about twelve children from all parts of Britain who originally came from different cultural background. Each poem is combined with children’s photos and a prose text that explains the historical background of the child: The list includes Melanesian, Indian, Chinese, Kurdistan, Croatian and Hungarian, Jewish, and Caribbean. The poems’ texts, and prose texts that accompany them show that these children are basically the same regardless of their ethnic background and religion. The poems reflect that these children share the same interests, hopes and dreams emphasizing the children’s attachment to Britain and identification with the British. In “Sevada Has a Brother”, for instance, the poem says “Sevada has a brother” and “how they love each other/ In their North London home” where they consider “London” as their “home” (2002, lines 17, 19-20). In “King of the Jungle” Liam becomes “king of the jungle/ The jungle in South Wales (2002, lines 1-2). Place names like “North London” and “South Wales” convey their attachment to their “home” land which is Britain. In short, the whole collection mirrors the twenty-first century multicultural and multiracial Britain where the Black British are officially recognized and hence participate in the remaking of Britain.

Another work that also hails multiculturalism is “The British”, an allegorical poem that uses the ingredients to represent the cultural diversity and heterogeneity of England in a funny way that demands quoting most of it:

Mix some hot Chileans, cool Jamaicans, Dominicans,

Trinidadians and Bajans with some Ethiopians,

Chinese, Vietnamese and Sudanese.
Then take a blend of Somalians, Sri Lankans,
Nigerians
And Pakistanis,
Combine with some Guyanese
And turn up the heat.
Sprinkle some fresh Indians, Malaysians, Bosnians,
Iraqis and Bangladeshis together with some
Afghans, Spanish, Turkish, Kurdish, Japanese
And Palestinians
Then add to the melting pot.
Leave the ingredients to simmer.
As they mix and blend allow their languages to
flourish
Binding them together with English.
Allow time to be cool.
Add some unity, understanding and respect for the
future
Serve with justice
And enjoy. (2000, lines 8-28)

The poet capitalizes all nationalities to emphasize that all of them are of equal importance. This poem sums up the change in the demography of Britain and its cultural diversity which reflects the commonality of their shared experience and consequently their Britishness. Zephaniah's "passionate plea for a multi-ethnic and multicultural Britain has made a valuable contribution to a multicultural and anti-racist education" (Rieuwerts, 2013, p. 136). As a matter of fact, his work is often taught in schools as part of English literature and cultural studies curriculums, where his poetry is used to facilitate discussions and debates on topics such as identity, diversity, and social justice. Zephaniah has also been involved in numerous educational initiatives and projects, including visiting schools and universities to give talks and workshops on issues related to multiculturalism and diversity. Moreover, he has been an advocate for making education more inclusive and representative of diverse cultures and perspectives (Rieuwerts, 2013, p. 136). In an interview with *The Guardian*, he emphasized the importance of incorporating Black and ethnic minority history and culture into the

school curriculum, stating that “students need to see themselves and their communities reflected in what they are learning” (Zephaniah, 2018). Overall, Benjamin Zephaniah’s poetry and activism have played a significant role in promoting multiculturalism, anti-racism, and diversity in education, making a lasting impact on the way these topics are taught and discussed in British schools. This all reflects his pivotal role in the remaking of Britain culturally and literary. From the examples above, it is obvious that his poems are written in a mixture of Creole and standard English symbolizing the sense of integration of both the Blacks with the white.

This emphasis of identification with the British is not confined to his poetry, but rather extends to his prose writings and speech. In an interview with him, when asked about the change of Britain to a multicultural country, his reply shows him as a British citizen where he kept saying “we” identifying himself with the British:

Yeah. We’ve gone through a very difficult time now. If you had interviewed me three, four, five years ago, I would say that when talking about freedom of speech, you should look towards Britain, not the States, because we have so much freedom here. But now we are beginning to emulate the States. Now we got so-called anti-terrorist laws and things that are not really about fighting terrorism at all, but rather about clamping down on movements and freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Which is really sad. I do believe

that we will overcome it. (emphasis added, Saguisag, 2007, p. 24).

Likewise, in his introductory essay to his collection *Too black too Strong* Zephaniah affirms his Black British identity through his repetition of the pronoun “our” identifying himself as British:

The reality is that refugees built the National Health Service, refugees built our roads, they clean our cars, and when given the chance new refugees contribute disproportionately to the economy because they have seen hardship and suffering and view economic success as a way of repaying their country of refuge (emphasis added, 2001c, p. 11).

He proceeds to express his gratefulness to Britain where “It is probably one of the only places that can take an angry, illiterate, uneducated, ex-hustler, rebellious Rastafarian and give him the opportunity to represent the country” (2001c, p. 12). He concludes this essay by expressing his deep attachment to this country “the truth is that the more I travel the more I love Britain” (14). Similarly, in his introductory two pages to his novel *Refugee Boy* (2001), he elaborates the reason for the refugees move to other countries in a way that blends all races who inhabit England from the ancient times together: “We all want to live in peace, we all want the best for our families. The Celts, the Angels, the Saxons, the Jamaicans are all refugees of one sort or another” (unpaginated). What Zephaniah is trying to prove is that England is made up of diverse

nations who have settled there throughout the ages and by time, they became part of it and hence participate in remaking it. This reflects his hope that other Afro-Caribbean living in Britain today will resemble him in identifying themselves as British where he states in a determined tone that “The day will come when we move from the margins and come to the centre” (2001c, p. 14). Additionally, in his introduction to his collection of poetry *We Are Britain!* he affirms his Britishness:

The British are not a single tribe, or a single religion, and we don’t come from a single place. But we are building a home where we are all able to be who we want to be, yet still be British. That is what we do: we take, we adapt, and we move forward. We are the British. We are Britain! (unpaginated)

In short, and according to Sigrid Rieuwerts (2013), Zephaniah’s identification and impact on the English culture and literary tradition is obvious:

He is seen as representing the face of a new, multicultural Britain and as such his work is regarded as an extension of the traditional canon. The Britishness he promotes is inclusive, multicultural and multi-ethnic. Zephaniah identifies himself as a British-Caribbean author (130).

Looking at similar concerns in the works of other Afro-Caribbean writers, one finds a quite few representative writers who look at Britain as their homeland. *Out of Bounds* is a collection of poems that maps Britain and its local and regional landscapes as seen by its black and Asian poets and “register a broader set of poetic attachments to landscape, attachments that today are nationwide but emphatically not nation-bound” (Kay, Procter, & Robinson, 2012, p. 15). Jackie Kay et al. states that the poets in these poems succeed in making the “world anew for us, reassert its familiarity... remind us that this place, these places, this contested territory, will be shared in more ways than we can ever know” (26). Linton Kwesi Johnson is a dub poet and reggae artist who explores issues of race and identity in his works. Although he was born in Jamaica, he has lived in England for many years and identifies as British. Here is an excerpt from his poem “Di Great Insohreckshan”:

Me she one thing,
Mek dem know she me black an’ me proud.
Me she one thing,
Mek dem know she me British an’ me proud.”

Translation:

“I say one thing,
Let them know that I’m black and proud.
I say one thing,

Let them know that I'm British and proud. (lines 9-12)

This excerpt emphasizes Johnson's assertion of his dual identity as both black and British. By declaring "mek dem know she me British an' me proud," he challenges the idea that blackness and Britishness are mutually exclusive categories. Instead, he asserts his right to claim both identities and to take pride in them. The use of Jamaican patois in the poem is also significant, as it highlights the intersection of different linguistic and cultural influences in Johnson's identity and hence symbolize their fusion with the British. The poem as a whole is a powerful affirmation of black British identity and a rejection of the marginalization and oppression faced by black people in Britain. Asher Hoyles (2002) a performance poet who was born in Leeds in her poem "Second Generation Story" also presents the blacks' efforts to be identified as British:

We done claim we rights

To live ya in a Englan

We nah wait for nobody

To gi we permission

We nah wait for nobody

Tm mek we feel welcome. (lines 48-53)

The title itself is indicative where she refers to this new wave of poets as "second generation" who celebrate their Britishness. Similarly, Grace Nichols, who was born in Guyana and has lived in Britain for over four decades, confirms in her poem "Wherever I Hang" that home means where she lives: "I get accustom to de English life" and that "Whenever I hang my knickers-That's my home" (1984, lines .25, 31). Shirley E. Mason whose performance name is Cuban Redd was born in Jamaica and came to England when she was three years old. In "No Limit" she emphasizes the same attitude of merging blacks with the British:

We' re coming strong, consistent

scottish,welsh or irish

english, black or white

We can create a balanced harmony

If we would just unite

To furnish strong foundations

Of trust, basic respect (Hoyles, 2002, lines 145, 42-48)

This sense of merging and equality is indicated in her deliberate way of writing all these diverse communities in the same small letters: "scottish", "welsh", "irish", "english", "black" "and "white". Malika

Booker, born in London to Guyanese and Grenadian parents, is performer poet who has won several awards for her poetry. Her poem "The Ungrateful British Daughter" is a powerful exploration of identity and belonging where she refers to herself as British: "I am the ungrateful British daughter/ Raised on fish and chips, Pimm's and cricket/ With a mouthful of plums and a mind full of doubts" (1984, lines 1-3). She describes being "raised on fish and chips, Pimm's and cricket" which are stereotypically British pastimes.

Besides these Afro Caribbean poets, many contemporary Black British writers wrote works that present Britain as their home. Fred D' Aguiar, a Black British writer in his poem "Home" expresses his sense of longing for his home England when he is away:

These days whenever I stay away too long,

Anything I happen to clap eyes on,

(that red telephone box) somehow makes me

Miss here more than anything I can name. (2012, lines 1-4)

He also states that:

Britain is a plural society. You can't surgically remove the black British contribution from what it means to be British - though I know there are many English people out there who still do that with passion and relish I want to opt into the intellectual combat defining where this culture is going. Being West Indian doesn't mean you're outside it. From the moment the Englishman Hawkins collected his first slave cargo, that was an act of engagement. After that, I belonged. (Childs & Horne, 1999, p. 201).

Bernardine Evaristo, a British writer who identifies as Black British, has published several novels and poetry collections, including *The Emperor's Babe* and *Soul Tourists*. While she does not explicitly identify as British in her poetry, her work often deals with themes of identity and belonging as they relate to the Black British experience. Here is an excerpt from Evaristo's poem "The Great British Summer," which was published in her verse novel *Lara* (1997):

Rain falls like confetti

On the Great British summer,

On the parks and benches,

On the abandoned Thames,

On the parade of humanity

That marches past my eyes. (lines 1-6)

In this passage, Evaristo captures the essence of the Great British summer, with its unpredictable weather and diverse communities. While she does not explicitly identify as British, her use of imagery and language evokes a sense of belonging and familiarity with the British landscape. Likewise, Kadija Sesay (2004) states that the characters in Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara* and Andrea Levy's *Every Light in the House* Burnin "see themselves, growing up, as being part of British society and are only made aware as they get older that they may constitute another blend" (103).

From the above mentioned, although Zephaniah, some Afro-Caribbean poets, and some Black British writers hail their Britishness, there has been a critical controversy from the perspective of the older generations. Some older Black British argue that this emphasis on multiculturalism overlooks the ongoing struggles of marginalized groups in Britain and that this identification with the British is a form of assimilation that erases their Blackness. Koye Oyedji (2005), for example, expresses his frustration of this new attitude saying that "a new generation having been born and raised here, feel no direct attachment to the works of diaspora as we know it, or rather knew it" (366). He goes on to say that "a Black 'British' individual in Britain can never be white. ...To be British is to carry a burden of representation, Blacks do not fit into the national identity of Britain, our very difference maintains its identity" (370). However, in contrast to this opposing attitude, Stuart Hall (1996), a Jamaican-born British cultural theorist, and political activist expresses his wonder of this recent change in the concept of identity:

I've been puzzled by the fact that young black people in London today... look as if they own the territory. Somehow, they, too, in spite of everything, are centered... I have wondered again and again: what is it about the long discovery-rediscovery of identity among blacks in this migrant situation which allows them to lay a kind of claim to certain parts of the earth which aren't theirs, with quite that certainty? I do feel a sense of-dar I say-envy surrounding them (114).

This aspect of transformation in the notion of identity echoes also in the writings of the sociologist Paul Gilroy (2001) who insists that it is time to "destroy raciology, transcend race, and liberate humankind from race-thinking" (12). Looking at Britain from their own British perspective, the latest wave of writers represents the interrelations between the Caribbean and the British and hence articulate their Britishness. From the above examples, Zephaniah's poetry and prose writing challenges the concerns of older generation and reflects a new positive perspective in the transformation of the concept of identity. Thus, through his poetry and prose writing, Benjamin Zephaniah is a typical representative of this new attitude who as Nisha Mathew confirms:

Though being born to non-British parents in an entirely different cultural background Zephaniah has been able to identify himself with the culture of Britain and has never lost his identity. He identifies himself with the monoculture of the world. And this makes him question and look at the state of justice in both of them. Even with racial persecutions and allegations raised against Britain, Zephaniah has said that Britain is a wonderful place (28).

Conclusion

The phrase "Black British" is comprehensive and includes authors of Afro-Caribbean, African, and Asian ancestry who share the commonality of having been born or grown in England and whose presence has reshaped English demography, culture, and literature. The present paper demonstrates the shift in the concept of identity of a new generation of Afro- Caribbean writers who differ from other former Afro-Caribbean or Black British. This new wave rejects conventional themes associated with ethnic minorities of older generations such as isolation, alienation, homesickness, displacement, violence, and racism by identifying themselves with Britain as their country. Their sense of belonging to this mother nation was mainly reinforced by the decline of the British Empire, immigration, and globalization. The new Black British in general and the Afro-Caribbean in particular are no longer outsiders but insiders making their passage to Britain. Ironically, Britain has become a colony of heterogeneous races who were formerly colonized by England before of the decline of the British Empire. The Black British, as R. Victoria Arana states, affirm their Englishness: "the new black British emphasis being on belonging to a new society, on owing it" (2004, p. 33). As a result, they helped to reformat their literature moving from post colonialism and Commonwealth literature to English Literature. They have established their presence and influence on the English literary canon in the twenty-first century, living up to Eliot's definition of tradition from his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" which results from their prolific creative output. Hans Bertens (2008) elaborates that "the sons and daughters of these immigrants" have by now begun to have an impact on the literatures of the places where they have grown up" which emphasizes their participation in the remaking of Britain as well as the British literature (158). This new wave of Afro-Caribbean is a defining force in Britain today who are seen to be no longer marginalized but rather centered. In short, their pivotal impact has changed not only the literary scene but as Bruce King (2002), says:

London changed from the center of an Empire and then Commonwealth to an international city where it is sometimes difficult to find British food, while the United Kingdom appeared to become several nations and many separatist minorities each with its own specialized laments. (144)

Thus, the study proves the shift in the concept of identity of Benjamin Zephaniah as a representative of the new generation of Afro-Caribbean who identifies himself with the British and celebrates their fusion with the multicultural Britain. His impact on English culture and literature can be summed up as being “an ambassador for Britain and its increasingly diverse nature” (Doumerc, 2005, p. 204). No wonder that he was the favourite poet of important politicians such as Tony Blair and Nelson Mandela and “in 1999 he was seriously tipped for the role of poet laureate of Great Britain” (Volkman, 2008, p. 252). This study has hopefully contributed to the field of cultural studies, Black British literature, and Afro-Caribbean literature opening the door for further investigation for other areas of Afro-Caribbean poetry: What differentiates Afro-Caribbean poets from other black British poets? Who are the most popular female Afro-Caribbean poets writing in Britain today? Do female Afro-Caribbean writers have the same literary impact as male poets?

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