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The truth behind the "Small Island": A postcolonial reading of Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004)

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Abstract

The ideology behind the colonization is explored in The Truth behind the Title: 'Small Island'. This article aims to bring out the conflicts in the novel by addressing the significance of the title of the novel; it also thrives into analysing which really is a Small Island as post-colonialism is closely linked to other concepts such as Ethnicity, Race, Nationalism, Home and Displacement. Colonization with its ideology and domination as adopted by the British could not stop subduing the colonized people. It all started with the aim of trade but later turned into oppression in the name of civilization; this colonization became the backbone of all the conflicts and leads to argue which is Small Island. Jamaicans viewed their land as small because they were made to believe that it is uncivilized and undeveloped economically even though it is bigger than England geographically.

Keywords: culture, displacement, home, identity, mother country, opportunities, *Small Island*



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Public Interest Statement

Colonisation at large brought conflicts particularly to the natives and in a way their socio-political, religious and geographical perspectives were drastically influenced. However realizations on the existing reality become obvious with profound experiences like that of Hortense's in this novel. It takes a life time for her to understand that England is a 'Small Island' justifying its meaning.

Introduction

According to Andrea Levy, writing has always been a journey of discovery about her past and family. All her books look at what it is to be black and British, trying to make the invisible visible and to put back the people left out from history. *Small Island*, published in 2004 was highly acclaimed by the readers and critics, and won the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction, the 2004 Whitbread Novel Award. In the 2005 she was awarded the Commonwealth Writer's Prize and the 'Best of the Best' of the Orange Prize for Fiction in the year. Though her other novels were well received and well-reviewed but they didn't get her voice heard. The novel, *Small Island* was something that gave her the ninth degree of recognition and widespread repute. The novel is centred on the lives of a Jamaican couple and a British couple who go through a number of life changing experiences based on race, culture and identity. They sail to England with lot of dreams. The dream has a significant role in the novel, and in the minds of the Jamaicans. It is crucial and draws a huge respect and devotion towards the so called 'Mother Country'. The pseudo national identity and flattery word about England's identity is questioned as the age of racial renaissance grips the entire globe.

Analysis

The Great Britain, obviously in the interest of foreign trade, made every possibility to establish more colonies and tried to subdue them under many roofs. Their view of colonies as the source of money and business grew as the natives were ignorant on their own wealth. It was just a cunning move to abduct the resources on a foreign land. The colonisers considered the colonies as the source of raw materials for number of things such as fur, iron, tobacco and sugar. The colonisers also viewed their land as the market place for what England produced, like tea, linens and silk. England was deliberately on the benefiting side by this mercantile system while the colonies went on debts. Owing to this, those who tried to carryout business without the knowledge of England for profit were considered to be illegal and were punished.

When time favoured, the English implemented the voluntary act of teaching every colonised people of the reverence and might of England as a preparation for future use. Their view on the one side remained on profitable business and on the other prepared them for the English Military services. This actually denied them to have their own defence and fight for their own lands even during the 1700s war. This treaty particularly created a tension between the Empire and the colonies, suggesting that the colonies are deprived of the rights unlike the citizens of the 'mother country'.

Jamaica was not an exceptional to be away from the design of the colonisers. Invasion was not an unknown factor for Jamaicans. They were colonised by Taino tribes even before the arrival of Columbus in 1494 and continued to be colonised by Spanish. England in the year 1655 invaded the island, defeated the Spanish and colonised it. This led the British to build the Port Royal for trade. In the course, they also imported thousands of Africans to Jamaica and the blacks outnumbered by 1800. Eventually the white population also increased as Cromwell sent criminals and indenture servants to Jamaica but that could not outnumber the coloured in the long run. The English as usual, used Jamaica for their financial profits and the defence services in times of war and disaster.

The one line slogan which made the Jamaicans to believe in the fake truth is 'better life in the Mother Country'. The colonisers consciously sowed the thought so as to make them the pseudo children of England. It was not very difficult for the colonized to accept England their mother country as they were already prone to slavery and colonisation. Eventually the view on England ended in imaginative fantasy. Everyone wanted to visit England, their dreamland which almost became like a holy land for the colonized. England is personified as the epitome of perfect culture, tradition and civilization which is not so true.

The sense of high civilisation placed England on a high pedestal and Jamaicans are tuned to bow at this stature and accept their subordinate status. In the meantime, they also turned out have a sentimental attachment with the mother country. People are trained to take pride in delivering the best for the 'Mother Country' which they considered a greater duty to be performed. Above everything it became the young women and men's ambition, to visit England like the characters in the novel, especially Gilbert where he feels:

Returning to England was more than an ambition for Gilbert Joseph. It was a mission, a calling, even a duty. ...He told me opportunity ripened in

England as abundant as fruit on Jamaican trees. And he was the man to pluck it. (p. 98)

Human power is the best power in the world because it forms the basis for any development and growth. This human power is most valued in times of difficulty and war. Especially, England in the 1950s faced with labour shortages which caused the sufferings of England's economy. This made England to seek labours from the overseas. Apparently they had the option to call for the colonies, the people were given citizenship and encouraged to migrate to England in order to fill many vacancies. As Jamaicans were already dreaming to live in England, they prepared to migrate in thousands. Once they initiated their livelihood in the United Kingdom it became evident that they are called to be exploited and used for the British Empire.

Other young Jamaican men like Gilbert bravely and proudly filled in the application for various higher grade posts in the British RAF but remained as just drivers and menial assistants throughout their stay in England. Apart from this failure and misfortune that the dream brought him, Gilbert had to pay a greater cost. He was forced to lose his rights, dignity and identity in order to make a better living with his wife Hortense, an underestimated Jamaican who also came to London in search of a better living.

When it comes to colonisation, without any second thought England can be identified as selfish. It is unfair to occupy somebody's land and enslave them by flattering. England prudently propagated the idea of new life which is preserved for the Jamaicans, yet England could not hide its true nature for longer time. The characters in the novel are the whole summary of all those who came to England with lot of dreams but instead learned how their selflessness is looked down upon.

Home is always considered to be somewhere in England for many of the Jamaicans, Sometimes it is both here and there or somewhere in between but ironically at times it is nowhere for them. When a person feels at ease and unconditionally accepted in a physical or nonphysical place, then that place is identified as home. Here the person is uncomfortable to take up the routines of daily life which actually helps to discover one's own identity. If this environment is taken out then one feels homeless. Andrea Levy presents the homeless environment of the Jamaicans in presenting Hortense and Gilbert living in a room which is the home for the immigrants. Even that home is not constant and did not last for them as Bernard aimed at eliminating them from the mansion because he said: "Everyone had a place, England for the English and the West Indies for these coloured people. ...I've nothing against them in their place. But their place isn't here" (p.

469). They were not accepted in the white society and were relegated from England's norms, values and rules.

Initially, Hortense and Gilbert were attracted to find home in England which ended in displacement rather to find them a home and provided them the sense of going back. They were displaced due to culture, race, colour and language. In the long run, England is also left with no option to accommodate different people yet the sense of homelessness in the hearts of Jamaicans prevailed.

Andrea Levy takes up the historical outlook to explain the cultural and emotional queries behind what it means to be British and to be Jamaicans or blacks. Both Gilbert and Hortense are the foster children of the Britain's concept of 'Mother Country'. This stuck all their hopes on England finally; at the same time the Empire still is not out of the effects of the war yet considers the immigrants as an alien. England could not happily welcome the Jamaicans as opposed to the imagery of a mother.

The new immigrants could not escape the raw reality when it comes to the aspects of race and ethnicity. Gilbert totally sees a different picture of England during the war and soon after the war. He is shocked to digest the treatment of the 'Mother Country' and how the same country welcomed them when it demanded their help but now ignores and regard them as mere outsiders. Pertaining to this view, Caryl Phillips in his essay titled "The Pioneers" which is devoted to the post Windrush generations, states: "Race and ethnicity are the bricks and mortar with which the British have traditionally built a wall around the perimeter of their island nation and created fixity" (Phillips, 2003).

Hortense and Gilbert, Queenie and Bernard are the inhabitants of the two small islands in this novel. Their experiences and stories are mended together to provide the true meaning of a small island. People have different opinions not only on the basis of race but on the multifaceted culture. Within London, people differentiate the urban and the rural inhabitants. Levy takes up the responsibility to identify the double standard of England during the war and after the war. All the social barriers and native differences seemed to be acceptable during the war as they required maximizing the defence but its aftermath; again England puts on its usual specks to judge people on their differences. England looks down Jamaicans as Gilbert put it: "as any of them, where in Britain ships are built, where is cotton woven, steel forged, cars made, jam boiled, cups shaped, lace knotted" (p. 328).

Both Jamaica and England comes under the umbrella of *Small Island*. In the deeper sense, the true small island is England, both geographically and ideologically but ironically England views Jamaica as *Small Island*. Jamaica is geographically wide and big, at the

same time, it is personified as *Small Island* because it is less known to the Londoners and hidden to the eyes of the 'Mother country'. As far as Jamaica is concerned, it is bigger than all other Islands in the Caribbean and it is as seen in the novel, the people of Jamaica immigrated to London and America leaving Jamaica, because of the opportunities they thought that these lands would provide them when compared to Jamaica.

Conclusion

The so called 'Mother Country' is embedded on the selfish ideology and it is more vivid when the characters really encounter England. Jamaicans high view of England is brought down eventually. Though it is small, Jamaicans' hopes and dreams enlarged its vicinity and promulgated it as the land of new life and better opportunities. At last Gilbert, who more than Hortense dreamt too high of England says: "All we boys were in this thankless place" (p. 128). There is always a wide gap between dreams and reality. Hortense and Gilbert learn how Englanders are small not only in geography but at heart, therefore both Gilbert and Hortense try and decide to reconcile with the fact that England is not as it was thought to be and so instead of complaining, it is better to bear with it. The title 'Small Island' is related with dream and reality. Noticeably 'Small Island' indicates England and Jamaica as well. During the war the British Empire shrinks due to the decolonised efforts where the great empire becomes a dream and the island becomes a reality. All these facts lead to a conscious reconciliation with the oppression of the 'Mother Country'. Naturally people adapt to the situation of misconceptions and lead a life that is offered than what is constructed. Andrea Levy concludes with this reconciliation amidst differences and she reconceptualise the island as a place of confinement and openness unity and diversity that also embraces and reflects interrelated fluid identities. The immigrants learned that England lack a great deal of tolerance required for a multicultural society even among the clash and conflicts. They also understand that the same degree of tolerance is mandatory to survive in a multicultural society like England.

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Bionote

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