

A Book Review: The Black Presence in English Literature, 1985, Edited by David Dabydeen, Manchester: Manchester University Press

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Introduction

In the sixteen, seventeen, eighteen and the nineteenth centuries, the United Kingdom of England, Scotland and Wales was an imperial power. She had colonies in the Americas, West Indies, Africa, Middle East and Asia. Being subjects of the British Crown, many natives of these colonies especially from Africa, Asia and the West Indies were taken to England to work in factories, farms and even as domestic servants. Indeed their numbers increased tremendously especially during the first and second world wars when many were brought to England to contribute to the war effort. Others of course migrated to look for greener pastures. Their contribution to the social and economic development of England has been a subject of interest to scholars in various disciplines. In the book under review, scholars of literature have made an indepth study of the presence and contribution of Asians, Africans, Chinese etc (hereafter: the people of colour) in the Arts, Commerce and in race relations not only in Victorian England but also in the colonial and post colonial period. In summary the people of colour in Britain in the past and even today, have been looked at with love and hate. They are tolerated when they are not a threat to the interests of the host (white) people and hated when they 'jockey' for the same. Quite often they have been portrayed in a negative light in the Arts, be it in drama or in the novel etc. In this review attempts will be made to look at each article and highlight the salient points raised by the author.

Review of the Papers

Appearing as the first paper, is '*Blacks in English Renaissance drama and the role of Shakespeare's Othello*' by Ruth Cowhig. In this article Ruth attempts to show that Black people were introduced into plays and folk dancing in medieval England and later, during the 16th Century from whence they "often appeared in the more sophisticated count masques". These actors or dancers were mainly valued for the exotic aesthetic effects which their contrasting colour provided. It is about this time that the black is developed as a villain-hero. For example in Thomas Peele's play '*The Battle of Alcazar*' (1588) Muly, Mohamet is introduced as 'the barbarous moore'. He is portrayed as cruel and treacherous, and his evil character is directly associated with his blackness. Shakespeare too followed this tradition in his play '*Titus Andronicus*'. Here, rape, mutilation and death succeed each other with grim monotony usually as a result of the devilish machinations of the black villain, Aaron. In the three plays: *Lusts Dominion, the Spanish moore's tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus*, "black people are represented as satanic sexual creatures, a threat to order and decency and a danger to white womanhood". In this paper the author also looks at the role of blacks in theatre and describes the racial prejudice they face.

The second paper entitled "*18th Century English Literature on Commerce and Slavery*" written by the editor, David Dabydeen makes a review of books written about commerce and slavery in the period under discussion. The article first starts by making a review of Britain's growth in trade and power resulting from the growth of colonies and the empire. The paper then looks at the then growing contradictions between slavery as a trade and the concerns gaining ground that this was a barbaric trade. The author also examines the various

poets and writers who have written poems and books trying to legitimize the trade as of benefit not only to the merchants but also to the victims themselves. These are referred to as the apologists in Afro-centric history. These writers argue that even if the trade is banned, the slaves would still be killed anyway by the civil war raging then in Africa. The blacks are therefore shouldered with the blame for slavery.

Dabydeen also examines one Poet-Young and his poem entitled '*the merchant*' who attack Africa because it does not practice the principles of capitalist development. Here the writer portrays Young as saying indirectly that "slavery is a benevolent institution, since it teaches the African the virtues of labour". In an in depth analysis of their works, Dabydeen asserts that "many of the pro-commerce writers who either justified slavery or minimized its inhumanity were in one way or another involved in the profits to be made from slavery". While those who attacked commerce as a force for squalor and degradation, focused increasingly on slavery for the substance of their views, and that the bulk of British anti-slavery literature written in the latter part of the century was spurred on by the propaganda of the abolitionist movement led by religious men like William Wilberforce. The author further notes that the 'dilemma over the slave trade – the recognition of its immorality and yet at the same time its profitability was one aspect of the general dilemma of the age in its attempts to reconcile the moral from the economic'. Whenever opportunity presented itself the slaves revolted. This legacy of "Criminalisation" of blacks is "according to contemporary opinion still a distinguishing feature of the racial encounter between blacks and whites." He concludes there is indeed a strong protest literature in black Britain, West Indies and U.S.A that shows that for the black to have anything from the system; it has to be through violence for the white man cannot listen to any other method.

The Third paper in the book written by Paul Edwards is entitled '*Black Writers of 18th and 19th Centuries*'. The purpose of the paper is to draw attention to the black authors writing between these periods and also to dispel the idea that black people have in the past simply been written about and have not spoken for themselves. The author looks at among others, the books published by two black people: *the letters of Ignatious Sancho and the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano or Equina or Gustavas Vasa – the African*. According to the author, Sancho's letters show him "both attached to and detached from the English values of his time". Equiano on the other hand describes his early years of his life as a slave and after he got his freedom. The flow of this literature has been towards the correction of black stereotypes and white attitudes, in other words the creation of a black self image is no longer merely the passive subject of white myth making. Here we see the two people actively telling their own side of the story as they see it. The author also makes a comparative critique of the writers: Horton and Edward Blyden. He asserts: "Horton saw the future of Africa in terms of its potential for the growth of a western style society. While Blyden for all his western Christian background insisted on the need for Africa to return to its Africanness: and with this assertion of a distinct shared Negro destiny, Blyden establishes what was to become one of the underlying principles of Negritude – a line of racial and political thought that was to be a potent force in the coming century. As was demonstrated by Senghor in his Negritude Philosophy. Also central to Blyden's argument, the author observes, is that Islam rather than the missionary Christianity ought to be the unifying faith of Africa.

In order to understand and appreciate the black people and their history, the author makes several suggestions by way of conclusion. He notes that "Equiano's autobiography, because of its interest and its easy availability in paperback could be suggested seriously for school reading and that studies in modern American black fiction and autobiography might be related to both Equiano and 18th century slave narratives. The author further observes that if pupils in British schools were to be reading Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, reference to Equiano,

Horton and Blyden could be made to deepen its perspective. He therefore calls for a new attitude not only in the schools but from academics. They should “be urged and encouraged to set up courses and carry out research in those fields by integrating black history and writing more closely into the traditional syllabus and for publishers to publish and market less expensive editions”, he concludes.

Ian Duffield’s paper “*Alexander Harris’s The Emigrant Family and Afro Black People in Colonial Australia*” makes a critical study of early colonial life in Australia. He uses Harris’s autobiography as a starting point. In his writings all of which drew heavily on his Australian experience, Harris is frequently critical of those with wealth and those in authority in the colony. The Australian born hero of the book Martin Beck is described as “a fine noble person” whose countenance lacked ‘the expression that low vices imprint’. In the novel, Beck’s grand plan is to become rich – understandably enough in a colony where wealth and power were related with crude directness. In the paper the author makes a thorough study of Alexander Harris’s books in the context of early colonial Australia. He concludes thus “these books provokes an analysis of the true nature of that presence in a convict and white settler society”. The ‘Emigrant Family’ is perhaps the first novel in Australian fiction to deal with the theme of the outsider in Australian society.

The next article in the book is ‘*Reading the Novels of the Empire: Race and Ideology in the Classic Tale of Adventure*’ by Brian Street. In this paper Brian is “concerned with present-day readings of the novels of empire, those tales of adventure in foreign places through which life overseas was brought home in vivid and memorable form to the vast majority of Victorians who never ventured abroad themselves”. The paper provides a critique of the contribution these works make to contemporary stereotypes and misconceptions of ‘race’ and ‘culture’. Here the author raises certain fundamental questions as a launching pad to his thesis in the paper. He observes:

“When a football crowd greets the arrival of a black player on the pitch with grunts and mock ‘ape’ noises, it might seem that the explanation is a matter ‘simply’ of prejudice and ignorance”.

White people, he notes are expressing their ethnocentric fears and prejudice about blacks. But the question still remains of why they should do so in this particular way? Why these particular noises and actions are taken to have that significance? Why is it that in this culture these symbols are agreed by the analysts as well as by the participants to have these meanings? This is where the evidence from the 19th century literature is significant. Their meaning is socially constructed out of a specific past which means that it is not enough to attend to the present circumstance themselves in order to explain them. The noises uttered by the crowd, the author states, are intended to bring out an association between black people and apes. The significance of this association is that apes represent earlier more ‘primitive’ versions of the ‘higher’ races of mankind - an idea adapted from the Darwinian evolutionary theory.

To repudiate this he argues “if one employed the criterion of coverage of hair, for instance, in order to liken certain human beings to hairy apes, then whites would be ‘nearer’ according to some scientists”. The association depends then, the author argues, on which criteria are employed’. In contemporary English culture these criteria have been pre-selected by a very specific and relatively recent history of ideas and conceptions about race, evolution and hierarchy. It is these conceptions that order and determine the specific representations familiar in football crowds and elsewhere in contemporary Britain as the author notes that in “examining the nature of these conceptions then we are also throwing some light on the ordering processes themselves and learning about the ways in which our deepest assumptions are constructed and legitimized and about how ideology is constructed”.

Writers of “ethnographic” fiction are significant for the image of ‘other’ societies

because of their ability to make 'deeply actual' both the scientific theory of the day and their own personal experiences and attitudes. There is indeed a close association between the descriptions of fictional societies in the 19th century "ethnographic" fiction and the description of 'real' societies today. In his conclusion the author summarises that "these 19th century literature continues to provide readers with an exclusive "British" identity through reference to a fictitious "primitive" and "savage other" and to legitimize the transposition of outdated and virulent myths and symbols of the 'alien' to 'real peoples' encountered in modern day Britain."

Frances M. Mannsaker's article entitled '*The dog that didn't bark: the subject races in imperial fiction at the turn of the century*' takes a critical look at literature written during the period in India and South Africa. She then makes a comparative study and argues that the novelists of the empire as a whole seem to accept a reasonably distinct ranking order among their broad type categories with respect to the characters. The natives who are most to be admired are those who come closest to the idea of the English gentleman, the most to be despised approximate to the cad. On the top of the scale then according to the author "is the high caste gentleman of his own kind". In the numerous Anglo-Indian novels of Mrs. Penny, he is the English educated Indian prince, combining the Western values and eastern courtesy such a one is Mr. Yacoob Ali Khan, 'a man who would grace any society in the East or West'. In comparison, in the Africa of Haggard, Buchan and Wallace, he is "the Zulu, or as with Ignosi – a prince of an imagined purer breed of the same stock". Such men are according to the author immediately recognizable for their innate nobility as demonstrated at the meeting of Sir Henry Curtis and Ignosi – "We are men, you and I" says the native. In her study of the Indian literary works of the period, the author further observes that "within the ranking scale there are specific preference. In the Indian fiction, Muslims, soldiers and hill people are better than Hindus, civilians and those from the plains". In Africa, the war-like Zulu are better than the Basuto and the Hottentot. These distinguishable categories of Africa can be paralleled in the fiction of native India.

David Daniell's paper '*Buchan and the Black General*' makes a critique of John Buchan's books and specifically the transformation of "Prester John" to the black general. The books generally deal with adventures of colonialists in the empire and experiences of administrators. Their adventures were published as popular literature not only for school boys but interested readers back home. The black general is portrayed as mean, ruthless and always at the beck and call of his master, the white man. The adaptation into the black general removed both the detail of the hero's observation and his weakness and humanity. This has the effect of dehumanizing everyone in the book, particularly the blacks.

In looking at the books of the two writers, McClure in his article "*Problematic Presence: the Colonial other in Kipling and Conrad*" observes the apparent *volte-face* of Kipling, he notes: "In his stories written in the 1880s and 90s Kipling uses many of the racist discourses, for example white/black, hardworking/lazy etc to defend imperialism". But in *Kim* (1901) he "breaks with convention offering instead a powerful criticism of racist modes of representation". In comparison the author notes that in "both Kipling's *Kim* and Conrad's *Malay* novels, we find powerfully persuasive representations of the colonized peoples' representations that identify them neither as innocents nor as demons, but as human beings, complex and difficult to be approached with sympathy, respect and caution". While studying Conrad the author observes that Conrad in his first novel *Allmayer's Folly* (1895) insists that "Europeans have the wrong picture of 'strange peoples' and far off countries. They think that in those distant lands all joy is a yell and a war dance. It is not so, the picture of life in these far off lands is essentially the same picture of life one sees in Europe". However, in the *Heart of Darkness* (1902) the author notes that Conrad himself succumbs to the interests of his own community and betrays his colonial subjects – the Africans he "represents" speaking through Marlow, Conrad identi-

fies the Africans as demons, and he insists according to McClure that "the picture of life" in the Congo forests is appallingly different from the picture in Europe.

In the *Heart of Darkness* then, the author states that "Conrad is torn between his dedication to accurate and sympathetic representation and his need to affirm the existence of radical, moral and epistemological darkness." Indeed he makes his African character bear the burden of that darkness and thus perpetuates identifications that justify European contempt and domination. Achebe while reviewing the *Heart of Darkness* notes that Africa is seen as the other place. It is the Africa of Heart of darkness: there are no real people in the dark continent, only forces operating, and people don't speak any language you can understand, they just grunt, too busy jumping up and down in frenzy. He therefore exposes the inherent racist in Conrad.

Abena Busia's paper: '*Manipulating Africa: the Buccaneer as Liberator in Contemporary Fiction*' concerns itself with contemporary novels whose image of Africa is shaped by a long continuing literary tradition of a myth of Africa. A tradition which owes its survival to its remarkable ability to adapt itself to the needs and tastes of changing British society. The author identifies two distinct literary traditions of novels of Africa: adventure novels and the political romance novels. The adventure novels have their origins in the literature of conquest written for the amusement of Victorian boys. Produced at the height of imperial confidence, these stories emphasize all the true qualities of the English gentleman – his moral courage and fortitude.

The second tradition, more self-consciously political in outlook, uses Africa as the setting for a great psychological or spiritual drama of self discovery. Citing the *Dogs of War* by Frederick Forsyth, the author critically looks at an author who portrays Africa through one country, the republic of *Zangoro* as a complete banana republic. Nothing works here because the white people have gone; the African government is portrayed as corrupt, vicious and brutal. The country is therefore, the perfect target for liberation, by who? You guessed it, the white man of course!

Significantly, where any form of benevolent and radical action needs to be taken, it is Europeans who organize it, and where any plan succeeds, it is European inspired. She observes; "In these novels the struggle for the liberation of Africa apparently has little or nothing to do with capable Africans but is rather a political and moral question for the European". The moral aspect of the disarray is important for the evangelizing mission. Secondly something in this country needs rescuing, either the country itself or sometimes a group of expatriates. These expatriates the author says 'are projected as standing for good and moral order which must be preserved from the threatening madness which is Africa'. In every case it is a group of expatriates who are introduced to effect the rescue and to save or liberate the land, and these expatriates are above all, warriors; they are our "buccaneers" with a 'moral mission'. Finally the author concludes by noting that "the notion of the black man as in need of control and the white man as his best master pervades this literature".

The last article in the book is '*The revelation of Caliban: the black presence in the classroom*' by Kenneth Parker. In this paper the author looks at the literature curriculum design and argues that 'the appeal to common sense' is manifestly inappropriate with regard to curriculum design in Britain. Particularly when that is associated with the objective of incorporating a sense of the 'black presence' in the classroom. What this means is that standard books are prescribed by the Ministry of Education to be used by schools, the leeway is given to individual schools/teachers or education boards to choose any book. This is determined by the students he/she has if the majority are white or people of colour. In this way he/she is expected to use common sense to choose books, quite often books about people of colour are rarely picked. He argues that the absence of the black presence in the literature tempts one to conclude that the black phenomenon in Britain is treated-ignored as if it did not exist.

To correct this he proposes a project aimed at 'foregrounding the black presence and other marginalized groups such as women in the curriculum. He concludes thus "*the liberation of Caliban and his revelation of himself* is therefore not simply a matter of ensuring the 'black presence' is expressed in the classroom but more fundamentally, it is a contribution to the project of destroying racism in contemporary Britain".

Conclusion

In the preceding pages we have looked at the critical studies and analysis by various scholars of the presence and contribution of the people of colour in English literature. In the various papers, it emerged glaringly that the people of colour have been portrayed in a negative, racist perspective. While the white people have been projected as liberators, good and the epitome of all that is pure and true. However, having successfully established the black presence in English literature, the prejudice they face, the stereotyping etc., the papers do not seem to make any suggestions for a plan of action; where do we go from here? This is crucial especially if you consider the fact that racism is an issue of grave concern today. One may ask; should this literary trend continue? How do we reconcile this with literary freedom and the quest to promote a plural cohesive society devoid of racial bigotry? Kenneth Parker and Paul Edwards make suggestions in their papers with a view to correcting this but the other papers are silent in this regard. In spite of this however, the papers are thoughtful, thorough, incisive and quite illuminating.