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**INTERROGATING BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS IN ANDREA LEVY'S
SMALL ISLAND**

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Abstract:

When an individual has an unrestricted heart and mind no one can force him/her into servitude. The manipulation of mind is the first step of oppression. Black Consciousness is the realization of the individuality of black man and his being equal to all other humans irrespective of their colour, country, culture, and religion. There needs to be systematic eradication of the dominant ideology of Blacks being savages and uncivilized, perpetuated to subjugate them. Black Consciousness is the awareness of self, of having pride in their values, culture, their intellect, and vision of life. As in history and study done about the past, the blacks needed to prevent themselves from conforming to white standards. Their constant effort to run away from their own individuality lands them nowhere. This paper focuses on the life of Hortense and Gilbert, black Jamaican migrants who arrive at the door-step of the mother country England thinking it to be their own. They have all their life considered British way of living as the perfect way to live. Andrea levy through them in Small Island shows that a person should always embrace their reality. She through her black characters evokes the consciousness of self, makes them see through all the propaganda of class and civilized ways of British life, that it was all a farce.

Keywords: *Black Consciousness, Individuality, Sense of Self, etc.*

Every literary genre is produced under the influence of socio-cultural situations. Black British literature is one such genre that emerged out of the circumstances the black community faced when they migrated to England in search of better life opportunities. The fiction created by black British writers deal with the innumerable and immense struggles that people of this community could possibly endure in a country with white majority. Black consciousness is one such aspect that still finds its relevance in the lives of blacks as they continue to suffer in the hands of dominant society. Black Consciousness though was mass movement with community activism at its core is now more of an ideological phenomenon. Andrea Levy writes the stories of black minorities who lived through the migration after the World War II



and strived to create a place for themselves in a society that does not consider them as their own. She through her works tried to assert a new confidence and pride in coloured people who otherwise considered themselves inferior from the Whites.

Black Consciousness is the awareness of being black and knowing that every oppression they are enduring is because of them being different in skin colour from the people of dominant society. To liberate themselves, they need to eradicate the values implanted in their minds; they need to regain their liberty and dignity by disregarding the whiteness as something ideal. Black Consciousness plays a vital role in black person's quest for identity. Steve Biko who started Black Consciousness as a movement defines it:

"Black consciousness... seeks to demonstrate the lie that black is an aberration from the normal which is white. It is a manifestation of a new realization that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate white man, blacks are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black... It seeks to infuse the black community with a new found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion, and their outlook to life" (Biko, 36).

Andrea Levy (1956-2019), born and brought up in a Caribbean immigrant family has herself faced the brunt of racism in her life. She has written extensively about both the generations of immigrants and the hurdles they faced in their daily life after coming to Britain. She efficiently handled the post-colonial themes such as racism, migration, identity crisis, slavery, etc, in her works. She declares herself having dual cultural identity. This is the main aspect that runs through all her works. Her parents have been pioneers of Windrush generation. Levy herself has experiences of race riots and turbulent times which made her write about it. Her novels *Every Light in the House Burnin* (1994), *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996), *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), *Small Island* (2004) and *The Long Song* (2010) try to investigate the hegemonic features of the changing society leading to the ideological restructuring of the individuals.

Levy's work sketches the panoramic view of how it is to be black under the Union Jack. She revisits history and tries to awaken the sense of pride in being black and Caribbean in people who do not acknowledge their originality. This consciousness of being black runs throughout the Black writings in Britain. The most empowering and fertile single motivation for the black writers is awareness of them being black. Black consciousness is a defining characteristic of Black writing in Britain. It has now transformed from community activism to an ideological awareness for the individuals. Andrea Levy thus became a voice for the people who migrated from Caribbean islands and her works stand as a manifesto of self-awareness for people of colour.

In *Small Island* (2004) Levy threads, a story of four people. The story oscillates between the past and the present sketching a narrative showing both the lives of migrant blacks after coming to England, and the changes that occur in the lives of white after the immigration of blacks on a large scale. As events and interpersonal interactions give both Black and White people fresh perspectives on reconstructing their identities, the desire to reposition oneself emerges as a recurring theme in the story.

Small Island (2004) tells the story of a couple from Jamaica Hortense Joseph and Gilbert Joseph, protagonists during and post-World War II, their fight against all odds to



survive in a society that treats them according to their origin and skin colour. They are Jamaican immigrants who have arrived in London with high hopes and future aspirations. They consider Britain to be their second home away from home, their Mother Country. The story of Queenie, a white landlady and Bernad, her husband who fought in Second World War runs parallel to it. The novels explore the relationship of blacks and whites in Britain.

Hortense is brought up and educated in English ways. She has always taken English culture as superior and looked down upon her own people and culture. She feels distanced from the culture of Jamaica and filled with passion and desire to move to Britain. She considers herself more civilized to have a life in Jamaica. Similar is the case with Gilbert who has been in The Royal Air Force and has thus lived both in US and Britain. He has lost his connection with Jamaica and considers it a small island with shrinking prospects. Both want to move to Britain, the place where they feel they belong to. "He's just come back from fighting a war and now this country no longer feels like his own" (Levy, 117). Hortense and Gilbert get married not out of love but to support each other in chasing their dream of living in London.

Hortense belongs to a mix race which makes her lesser black than others. It draws her many favours and she is proud of her skin colour "with my golden skin, everyone agreed that I would have a golden future" (Levy, 527). Though she has excelled her English-speaking abilities and her manners she still is not welcomed by White missionaries in Jamaica. Her admiration for English life and language has made her delusional. Everything she knows about England and English culture is from her teachers, family, and her friends. Her fantasies for her life in London know no bounds. All she thinks is Daffodils and British meals. She says: "England became my destiny... I need to prepare meals. We eat rice and peas on Sunday with chicken and corn, but in my English kitchen roast meat with two vegetables and even fish and chips bubble on the stove... I sip a hot tea by an open window and look on my neighbours in the adjacent and opposite dwelling. I walk to the shop where I am greeted with manners... politeness... and refinement... A red bus, a cold morning and daffodils blooming with all the colours of rainbow" (Levy, 100-101).

Black consciousness that started as a movement in Africa was centred upon this idea of being stranger in one's own country and culture. It implies the rejection of all the value systems that treated blacks as a foreigner in his or her own country of birth. Anything that makes him think to be inferior must be disregarded. It suggests that blacks need to recognize the importance of them being human and that they take pride in their race and culture. Levy's work shows the signs of Black consciousness. She puts forth the psychology of blacks where they consider themselves inferior and want to be like the whites. She tries to clear their minds by making them realize the reality. Hortense neither considers herself black, nor she likes to associate herself with people from her country. When her friend tells her that the men of the country are joining The Royal Air Force to stop Hitler from winning and reinstating slavery, Hortense says that no one can enslave her as she is a fair skinned Briton. "No one would ever think to enchain someone such as I. All the world knows what that rousing anthem declares: 'Britons never, never, never shall be slaves'" (Levy, 59). Her despise for black people is clearly visible in her thoughts about the black students she used to teach in Jamaica: "Sixty children fidgeting like vermin.... sixty nappy-headed, runny nosed, foul-smelling ragamuffins.



Sixty black faces. Some staring on me, gaping as idiots do...their fickle minds would start wandering... at that school for scoundrels I had learnt to despise" (Levy,56-58).

Gilbert also shares the same emotions for Britain. He joined The Royal Air Force during World War II to serve the mother country. He tries to fit in White society mimicking their language and attire but it all goes in vain; he is still treated as an outsider. One reason for Gilbert's joining Royal Air Force was his desire to assimilate in British culture, that he would be included among them as he had fought for them.

Levy through her narration of these characters reveals the manipulation colonialism has done in the psyche of colonized specially the coloured. They start seeing themselves through the lens of Whites and always wish to be like them. The colonizers have created a mindset among the blacks whether they are from Africa or Caribbean islands that they are the natural superior race created by the God, they have arrived to civilize the blacks who are otherwise savages and have no culture, class, or manners. The colonizers have made themselves an embodiment of ultimate human being while the people from the third world blacks specially were at the lowest of ladder. Biko says: "Children were taught, under the pretext of hygiene, good manners and other such vague concepts, to despise their mode of [sic] upbringing at home and to question the values and customs of their society" (Biko, 79).

In the prologue of *Small Island* Levy shares a scene in the life of another protagonist Queenie, who is a White British lady. She in her childhood visits the 1924 Empire Exhibition where the colonial subjects especially blacks are portrayed as uncivilized savages and peripheral others. Queenie, the white landlady of Gilbert and Hortense here plays the role of archetypal character of England. Her thoughts about an African man reveals the very core of racism and imperial mindset that was created even by a little white girl. The misconception and colonial stereotype created is visible. When an African man came in front of her, she thought him to be carved out of melting chocolate, "a monkey man, sweating a smell of mothball" (Levy, 6). "Blacker than when you smudge your face with a sooty cork" (Levy,6), that this man would eat her up. This was the myth that was created by colonials for blacks. For Queenie black man is a strange being, her feelings about him are filled with revulsion and ridicule. Levy by writing this in the beginning clearly stated that this is what is being done to blacks and through the course of the novels dismantles the myths and stereotypes created. By offering to shake hands with Queenie he suddenly changes her perception about not only about other colonies, Africa but also about the whole world and through this Levy sets the stage for what is to come in the novel. Levy through this incident when Queenie shakes hand with the African man, she is made to see beyond his skin colour and acknowledge his humanity, as she says that he is human like them, "It was warm and slightly sweaty like anyone else" (Levy,6).

Levy draws the trajectory of Hortense's life from her increasing passion for Britain and English life to the reality check she gets when she lives in London. Through Hortense's life and the surroundings, the relationship between blacks and whites is explored in an insightful way. When she arrives in London, the taxi driver is unable to comprehend her version of English language. She is challenged every now and then because of her race and origin. She wants to be a teacher but she is out rightly rejected. They treat her condescendingly; no one tries to adhere to her set of manners and politeness. The English



ways she was taught and the ways in which a normal English man lives are two different realities.

Andrea Levy has gone through incidents that made her realize the reality around her. She lived in a bubble where she never considered herself black. She thought herself to be one of the British but she was made to face her reality. That is when she went on to exploring her heritage and accepted who she is and took pride in it. She started writing to give voice to the voiceless. She brings to light the British Caribbean ancestry. The colonial societies were created by the British; they gained enormous profit from them and discarded the people on racial grounds. Her narrative is a journey of self-discovery for blacks.

Gilbert as a black soldier faced many difficulties in comparison to white soldiers, the dangers were not only the war but racial prejudice and racial attacks by the white soldiers. But he and other soldiers faced them all with zeal to save their mother country. When he arrives in London with a hope to get better work opportunities, he was rejected on every front. He is forced to do a menial job; his being a soldier also does not earn him respect. He cannot even arrange a decent place for himself. "So how many gates I swing open? How many houses I knock on? Let me count the doors that opened slow and shut quick without even me breath managing to get inside" (Levy, 177). The mother country's reality forces him to say: "The filthy tramp...Ragged, old, and rusty...This stinking cantankerous hag. She offers you no comfort after the journey. No Smile. No welcome" (Levy, 139).

The Romantic image of the Mother Country which Gilberts idealized shattered upon him when he was confronted with discrimination and hostility. He is considered an outsider by the white English natives. He realizing his value and the importance of his own culture along with the adjustments he needs to make to survive in Britain generates a diasporic black identity. He never leaves his originality, which is all the time visible in his language, in his taste in food, his thoughts about England and Jamaica.

Levy through her work tries to instill in black Jamaican immigrants a sense of self. She through her award-winning works wants to acknowledge the problem of blacks associating themselves with the whites in everything they do. She through her works tries to convince people of other races and colours that they should value their value system equally as they do of whites. Black Consciousness's essence lies in the necessity of modifying the thought process of blacks which is moulded according to the foreign values which make them more flexible to exploitation.

Levy along with the black characters that see Britain as a dreamland created certain saner voices amongst them who think rationally about the blacks and what they need to prioritize in life. She portrays Gilbert's cousin Elwood as an islander strongly attached to his roots, which refused to get involved in a war that has been started by the Whites and is being fought for them. He says "You born a Jamaican. You die a Jamaican...Why you wan' leave?" (Levy, 208). While Gilbert thinks his place of origination as a place of stagnation, their varied views about their own country and their future are indicative of the changing dynamics of Caribbean Island and the mother country. During the tumultuous times, the colonized country became the sprouting spot for Black Consciousness. Elwood Says: "Mainly get us the vote... we must govern ourselves. Gilbert hear me nah-no more white man, no more... Me say get rid a Busta to. Him too licky-licky to the British" (Levy, 199).



Levy through her narration provides the Black people a chance to rethink and construct a new global order that is based on tolerance and acceptance. She makes the whites know the reality, value and importance of colonial subjects who have been an unparalleled part of creation of present Britain.

Queenie stands as the contact zone between Blacks and whites in a post war British society. Her empathy towards Caribbean blacks draws her in the centre of criticism but she never leaves her kindness towards them. Queenie and Gilbert's friendship stands as an example of a collaborative British society. She welcomes Gilbert and shows great hospitality when he brings back her old father-in-law. She kept black tenants in her house when it was very difficult for them to find a house. Her conceiving of a biracial child and its birth at a controversial time when blacks were seen as intruders pushes Levy's agenda of black consciousness, recognition, and acceptance of blacks and finally creation of their own space.

Levy instils the acceptance of diversity, different customs, and viewpoints through her white character. According to her, it is important to revisit and revamp old historical narratives which are dominant and the social relationships that render the colonial subject to become peripheral 'other' making them invisible to the centre. The consciousness of self is the first step to freedom and empowerment. The rebuilding and growth of self in a black person is Black Consciousness. The struggles become secondary when the black person has pride and positive attitude towards themselves.

Andrea Levy's works are not directly related to the Black Consciousness movement rather they reveal the journey of the coloured individual from disillusionment to self-realization. It shows the consciousness of being a human as important as a white human. The characters through the ups and downs ultimately become in-charge of their own destiny. They stop seeking validation from the white counterparts. They discard their marginalization. They start redefining themselves, seek to create their own place as who they truly are and stop aspiring to be included in white society.

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