

Recent Diasporic Novels in the UK: A Japanese Perspective

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Abstract

My aim in this paper was firstly to clarify the Japanese social and cultural contexts from which I had studied black literature as well as the purpose I had set for my study, secondly to explain why I had changed my focus from the US to the UK black writers and thirdly to discuss the recent diasporic novels in the UK. The first novel I discussed was David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*. My focus was on comparing it with Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge*, both of which dealt with the time of the slave trade and had similar protagonists and to identify the uniqueness of this novel which was on the one hand, related to the stereotype of black presence as sexual object and on the other, was about the complexities of African past compared with the image of the 'dark continent' held by Europeans. The second novel was *Anita and Me*, by Meera Syal, a British Asian writer and an actress. I discussed the novel in comparison with Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brown Stones*, a story of a Bajan girl growing up in the Bajan community in New York. *Anita and Me* is a sort of an initiation story in which Meena, a heroine of the story started out for an adventure with the town's juvenile delinquents in rebellion against the banality of the respectable family life. Through this adventure Meena came to know her identity as an Indian immigrant who together with blacks from the Caribbean was hated by the ignorant hooligans. It is this aspect of the novel which make it part of black novels in the UK. The third novel was *A Distant Shore* by Caryl Phillips. It is a story of the encounter of Dorothy, a British white middle class woman with Solomon, a refugee from Africa and the development of friendship between them which ended up with his being killed by the hooligans of the small town nearby. In this novel the focus of Caryl Phillips is to depict what was behind Dorothy's access to 'otherness' or a 'diaspora' in the form of Solomon or how it was possible for her to be able to get interested in his life.

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A Japanese Perspective

To have an interest in Black literature in Japan from the post-war period to at least early 90s, was in itself an act of rebellion against and a criticism of the academic and political mainstream of Japan. It worked both ways. It was against American Imperialism with built-in racism and also against the lingering feudal remains in Japan, toward the realization of a more democratic Japanese society. In a word, the Black studies in Japan have been rooted in Japanese society as part of larger social movements looking for alternative visions for Japan. But to study literature as part of a larger project of social transformation was out of the question under the great influence of the New Criticism and the racism in the US.

Under such circumstances, I as a young scholar decided to choose Black literature as my main field of study in 1975. Like so many people involved in Black literature, I began to study such major writers as Richard Wright, Ralf Ellison, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes. And then in 1979-80 when I was staying in the US as a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley, I took notice of the emergence of the black women writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, etc. Their works, reflecting the period of the Civil Rights Movement and the way black women got involved in it, were full of the collective energy of the people for social change, vibrant with a new consciousness of black feminism as well as a new insight into their past, giving visibility to those historically silenced and ignored people, especially black women.

Japan in the 80s was undergoing great overall changes. With the realization of Japan's economic goal to be part of the Western world, a civil society with thick layers of rather affluent middle-class began to emerge, and the former feudalistic groupism was gradually replaced by individualism. But the success of modernization did not go without the resulting weakening of former social ties, leaving people as lonely individuals, suffering from spiritual loss.

With the spread of higher education, a new generation of women with education was emerging and their frustration with man-oriented Japanese society formed a receptacle for a new idea of feminism and the feminist movements in the Western world.

Under such social and cultural contexts as existed in Japan, it was natural that black women writers found eager readers among pioneering young and middle aged women and men. The works of black women writers seemed to encourage those men and women in Japan who were committed to creating larger

social and cultural spaces for democracy and human rights in Japan.

During the 90s, as the Affirmative Action generation emerged and achieved breakthroughs in the various social and cultural fields in the US, leaving behind mass population in inner-cities, these new Affirmative Action black writers began to lose mass basis for their creative writing. As a result of that, although the major black women writers still continued to write and have wide attention about their works, the ethos of black literature and black studies began to be lost and was being replaced on the one hand by the a new generation of the Caribbean based writers and on the other by the black British writers.

By black British writers I mean not only those writers who, as second generation immigrants to Britain, have basically grown up as British and are of Caribbean ancestry, but also of South Asian ancestry who in the unique British context have been treated as blacks and therefore have strongly identified themselves with black immigrants' experience. They are writers who are part of the trend to demand the realization of multi-cultural Britain with a strong sense of individuality.

It is as a result of such consideration that I have shifted my scholarly attention from the US to Britain where you can trace the history of black British writers since the end of World War II. During the 50s and 60s a lot of writers emerged and celebrated the first flowering of black British literature and since the middle of the 80s through the 90s, we are witnessing the second flowering of black British literature. My recent interest is in the contemporary writers, especially Caryl Phillips and my concern in this presentation is to discuss the works of contemporary writers which you see below.

Originally I was planning to choose Zadie Smith as one of the writers I am to analyze. But on second reading of her *White Teeth*¹(2000), I have found that, although her work is humorous and witty with a lot of colorful materials of interest derived from the Indian and Caribbean history, thus giving hitherto unknown dimensions to the multi-ethnic society in London, the way she treats the material is at the best, journalistic and curiously avoids going deeper into the intricacies of human psychology, which has made her characters after all seem artificial and unconvincing.

The works I have chosen, on the contrary, are full of insights into human psychological complexities and through the deeper depiction of characters shed light upon and reveal the history and contemporary world in the UK. The key

1. *White Teeth*, Penguin Books, 2000.

concept which connects these different novels is black diasporic² experiences in historical stages from slavery, during the 60s to the present.

A Harlot's Progress

The exploration of slavery continues to be of great importance and David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*.³ (1999) seems to me a work comparable with Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge*⁴ (1993).

Firstly, the protagonists of both novels had extraordinary luck or ill luck of being patronized by the slave ship captains and had opportunities to be educated in Christianity and the Western Civilization, which set them apart from the fellow Africans in various senses.

Secondly, both Cambridge and Manu have similar diasporic relationship not only with Christianity and the Western Civilization, but also with African culture and its people. Both of them belong to the world of Christian and the Western culture, but at the same time do not, being rejected and abused or seen as not what they really are, both by the higher people and lower ones in Britain. Neither are they accepted by their African brethren and fellow slaves as equals due to their privileged status and education endowed by some whites. As a result of it, both of them have ambivalent feelings and attitudes toward African culture and people which have been reflected in the ambiguous way they act toward his brethren.

Thirdly, as a logical consequence of the above mentioned similarities, both novels focus on undermining the distorted images of their identities to reveal the discrepancy between appearance and reality by projecting alternative visions of them as elite blacks.

Then what is the uniqueness of Manu in comparison with Cambridge? The way Manu is distorted and appropriated by the whites he encounters is quite different from the way Cambridge is done. Whereas in *Cambridge* it is author's task to salvage him from the image of trouble-maker, thief and murderer projected by the whites, in *A Harlot's Progress* it is to salvage him from the sexually loaded image of 'bringer of disorder' and that of 'an egg hatching in

2. I would like to define 'diasporic experience' in a broad sense including various forms of diaspora from slave experience, immigrant experience, refugee experience with accompanying sense of being a part of a country or a culture but still feeling not totally part of it or isolated from it.

3. *A Harlot's Progress*, Vintage, 2000.

4. *Cambridge*, London, Bloomsbury, 1991

themselves'. In other words, Dabydeen is exploring other dimensions of black presence in white minds.

The first dimension is the metaphor of prohibited sexuality and violence. Although Captain Thistlewood of the slave ship patronizes Manu and provides him with Western culture and Christianity, he also abuses him as an object of his homo-sexual desire with accompanied sadistic violence.

The moral and personal disintegration of Lady Montague is another case in point. The reports of the massacre of the black slaves on Thistlewood's ship arouse in her mind not only terror but also 'nerve of pleasure so long quiescent' in her civilized life without love. And with Lord Montague bringing Manu-turned Perseus into her house, 'she introduces him to Western civilization in the daytime, but at nights, he will visit her in dreams of such adventure that she will not recognize herself in them, her trespassing beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations.' But because this undermines her existence as a civilized lady, 'she comes to dread the approach of night, taking pills to stave off sleep, but finally surrendering to the assault of dreams'. The subsequent treatment-abuse by a Jewish doctor, Gideon is a further stage for her indulgence in the pleasure of lust and abandonment of her appearance as a lady. Thus Manu-turned Perseus is nothing but the projection of her unconscious and prohibited sexual desire.

On the other hand, in Lady Montague's house Manu is also a victim of double abuses by the inhabitants of the lower world in the house. To Lizzes he is an object of physical abuse as a result of her frustrated life as a maid and to Lizzes' daughter, Jane, he is an object of her mindless sexual desire.

The abolitionist biographer of Manu, Mr. Pringle, however, never tries to see what's really happening between Manu and the white people he encounters such as Captain Thistlewood and lady Montague, thus ignoring how he is exploited sexually as well as culturally.

Thus Manu is at the mercy of the Civilized World in its upper and lower spheres. During the whole process nobody really sees what's happening in his mind. Irrespective of what he really is, he is abused and victimized according to the images of him in the minds of his abusers.

Another dimension of this story which is unique and different from the experience of Cambridge is that, although Cambridge dies alone, Manu finds in Gideon, the Jewish doctor, a true friend of his. Their solidarity comes not only from their common lot of being abused and disfigured by the stereotypical images of them but also from their peculiar way of showing compassion towards whores, another example of outcast people in the West. Peculiar because, ironically, what

they did for them was to kill them. Here Manu becomes not the victim but a victimizer. Here lies the ambiguity of his existence as friend-victimizer of whores prescribed by the helplessness of their conditions.

But to Manu, Moll who is mentally sick but physically the epitome of beauty is an exception. He tries to rescue her. But in his attempt to rescue her, Manu finds himself aroused by lust for her and have a sense of guilt in his act. He is not exempt from the lust for her beauty when he tries to heal her mental illness and finds that he can do nothing to relieve her from the mental ailments.

Another dimension where *A Harlot's Progress* is different from Cambridge is the relationship the protagonists have with Africa and its people as well as its culture and religion. Whereas Cambridge as a pious Christian missionary totally dismisses African religion as heathenism and could in no way understand his wife who increasingly indulges in an African religion, Manu has a far complex relationship with it. And these complexities and ambivalence toward it is behind the alternative ways of depicting their life histories with their different and conflicting versions.

Nobody knows exactly what Manu's life in Africa was in his relationship with his father, mother, Rima, his boyhood friends and other villagers due to the fact that one version is revised and given another interpretation immediately after it's told. It looks like another example of post-modern novelistic technique, but I would rather like to see it as an attempt to re-capture an African past in its diversities and richness which would not allow one fixed story to exhaust it. Whereas to Cambridge Africa as a heathen domain put an end to his exploration, to Manu it was the space for milliard interpretations.

Still it is clear that the past of a small African village is often recalled from a feminist perspective focusing upon angry Rima giving voice to her victimized life and a lame woman Ella who is to be thrown out of the village due to her barrenness.

One of the most fascinating story in Manu's African life is concerned with this Ella who seeks help from Kaka, a village beggar. And Kaka tells Tanda, a rich and generous farmer that she is barren, which is true, but Tanda interprets Kaka's story as 'sexual confession'. And Tanda imagines that Kaka says that Ella is barren only because he wants her to be sent to wilderness because he thinks that the child is to be born to mockery, being a child of a beggar and a lame woman. And Tanda spreads his version of the story in the village, but ironically it backfires on him because people who hear it think that it is really Tanda that is having a relationship with Ella partly because Tanda's story was not totally

convincing. Under the famine which plagues the village, although people were often helped by generous Tanda, the news of Tanda's relationship with Ella gives a new light to Tanda's success and he becomes an object of envy and jealousy and even hatred of the villagers. And even his wife suspects his infidelity and finally Tanda is killed by a villager. And Kaka at the end of the story confesses that it was he that killed Tanda by throwing a stone. It was because Kaka also comes to believe the story Tanda spread.

No villagers in this story take things at their face value and they try to interpret them otherwise, looking for a hidden meaning or motive of the talker. Kaka knows that people in the village don't believe his words because he is despised. People in the village want to believe that it is rather Tanda who has a relationship with Ella because of their secret envy of and jealousy for Tanda who is successful even in the famine. And once they believe it, it further accelerates their envy and jealousy.

This story, although an exaggeration, is quite revealing because it depicts the small world of an African village where, although people are often plagued by famine, social stratification and rules, are established and people make communication in a sophisticated manner motivated by and reflecting various conflicts of interest. The point of the story, it seems to me, is to impress readers with the idea that the small village is a small cosmos comparable to the world of the Greek and Roman myth, origins of the 'civilized world'. This is obviously not the 'dark world' Europeans thought Africa was.

Anita and Me

Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*⁵(1996) seems to me one of the most impressive achievements in the genre of autobiographical novels, depicting how an Indian family adapts to the British environment during the 60s from the point of view of a small girl.

This story is not without precedents. We may probably compare this with Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brown Stones*⁶(1957). Although Marshall's novel depicts the poor Bajan family struggling against odds in New York's Bajan community, Meena's parents are college educated people with decent jobs and can afford to live in an all white blue-collar working class neighborhood called Tollington, a small industrial-rural place in England. Whereas in Marshall's

5. *Anita and Me*, New York: The New Press, 1996.

6. *Brown Girl, Brown Stones*, New York, Random, 1959.

novel a young girl grows up split by conflicting values of her parents, that is, that of the down-to-earth, strong and stoic mother and that of the pleasure-loving, escapist but poetic father, in the Syal's novel the ten year old girl grows up nurtured by the love and discipline of her parents as well as the extended Indian family who make much of respectability as a strategy of survival in an all white neighborhood. But it is exactly because of such circumstances that Meera, bright and full of life and boldness like Selina in Marshall's novel, looks for something more exciting outside her house in another world whose values are quite opposite to hers. That is exactly the world inhabited by the village's outcast adolescents. This differentiates her from her obedient cousins who shy away from the dangerous world, exposing her bold and stronghearted character. That's why Meena is compared with Mark Twain's Huck.

Although Huck's adventure leads him to a revelation of the humanity of his fellow traveler and a fugitive slave, Meena finds that her best friend Anita actually is not what she thought she was, when she finds that Anita's mother calls her dog 'nigger'. Meena's immediate reaction to it is to see that Anita's mother hated not only blacks but also her. This is the one of the important ways for her to know who someone is in regard to her identity as a daughter of an Indian immigrant family.

And one of the crucial turning points of the novel is the scene at the end of the Village Fair in which Sam who is the leader of the skinheads in the village, but whom Meera had a crush on for a long time, declares to all the people gathered there his hate against blacks, not knowing that she is part of what he hates. Even though Anita and Sam were the only kind of people Meena felt she could love and share adventure in the world outside of her respectable family, this incident makes her turn away from them. What makes this novel part of black British novels is this strong sense of identification with black immigrants' experience in the UK. From this point of view this is a story about the return of a child from an adventurous outing to her normal respectable ways that prod herself on to a new stage of a grammar school life.

Another interesting aspect of this novel is the revelation of Meena's parents and 'Arnt' and 'Uncles' former life in India which leads back to the tragic period of partition between India and Pakistan after World War II. Another thing which was of interest to me is the way these immigrants from India preserve their customs and culture in their family life and in their often held parties where they exchange information about the country they have left and enjoy being enraptured by Meena's father's beautiful singing performance and create a space where they

can feel at ease to be what they are. This is a picture of a multicultural UK which remains quite invisible unless depicted by a talented immigrant writer.

The British people as seen from an Indian perspective is another interesting aspect of this novel. The way Meena perceives them is quite vivid and subtle partly because, I think, Meena was brought up in an English school and culture and still an Indian girl due to her family life. Without the former she would never have known people around her from the inside. Neither could she depict them as strangers with strange customs without the latter. So it happens that instances of cultural differences occupies a very interesting space in this novel.

Furthermore, Meena's insight into those people in her village reveals the spectrum of attitudes toward immigrants from the stark hostility of the skinhead kids based upon lack of education and ignorance, the patronizing arrogance of Reverend Ince to the third-world people, to the more decent, compassionate and amused attitude of ordinary people in the neighborhood.

A Distant Shore

Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore*⁷(2003) is his latest attempt in the form of a novel to capture the contemporary English scene through the exploration of the two protagonists. Dorothy Jones is a retired music teacher who has come to live in a newly developed Stoneleigh on the edge of Weston, an old village in the suburbs of the town where she was born. Mr. Solomon or Gabriel has fled for his life from one of the war-stricken countries in Africa and was to be imprisoned in the UK for a false charge and was saved by a liberal lawyer and then by a warm hearted British truck driver and his family and landed there at Stoneleigh as a caretaker. They are both lonely people and keep their counsel to themselves. But somehow they both find in each other a possible compassionate listener to the history of their difficult lives and just begin to have a fulfilling relationship when Solomon gets killed by the hooligans in the town who hate his color.

Considering that more than two-thirds of this novel is dedicated to the story of a white British woman, I would like to mainly concentrate on the analysis of Dorothy, which would reveal authorial intention of this novel and the main significance of it in contemporary Britain.

Caryl Phillips' depiction of Dorothy's life is reminiscent of the way James Baldwin delineated the heroes in *Giovanni's Room*⁸ and *Another Country*⁹ in the

7. *A Distant Shore*, London: Secker & Warburg, 2003).

8. *Giovanni's Room*, New York: Dial, 1956.

sense that Baldwin's protagonists couldn't live a full-life until they came to terms with their lives as homosexuals or black men. Dorothy is a white respectable woman with a college education and a career as a music teacher at a Grammar school. But in her private life she has been suffering from a frustrated life first as a wife whose 'opinions were never sought' by her husband, and after she was deserted, a desperate lover, who ran after semblances of love to make herself oblivious to loneliness to become a 'speared object' of an Indian married man and then a crazy woman who sexually harasses a younger married teacher. The last incident turned out to infringe upon a rule of the school she was working for, which led her to accept 'a decent early retirement package' offered by the School Master. It was on this occasion that she could for the first time in her life think of talking to her younger sister Sheila with whom she has had a strained relationship since childhood. Sheila had run off from her family and took her lesbian lover to the funeral of her mother to the dismay of Dorothy and never appeared at the funeral of her father.

Then what was wrong with her life? Dorothy reminds me of the obedient cousins in *Anita and Me* and Sheila does of Meena, the heroine of the novel. *A Distant Shore* is a story written from the point of view of the cousins, who, seeking to be loved by their parents, conform to the standard of respectability set by their parents and would not achieve a spirit of their own. And the obedient daughter became an obedient wife who 'buried her aspiration beneath those of Brian'.

Contrary to Dorothy, Sheila, originally a favorite of her father but rebellious of nature, fights back against the narrow and restrictive world of their working class parents, wants to lead an independent life free from the fetters of their parents, and runs off from the family to lead a life in London. And she only comes back to attend the funeral of their mother with her lesbian girlfriend, but did not attend their father's leaving Dorothy to shoulder the burden.

The most important thing in terms of understanding Dorothy in the first chapter is that Dorothy is in transition from the old, conventional self to a new one. Dorothy, faced with the crisis of her own life, seeks reconciliation with Sheila at her death bed. 'She thinks 'After all, her sister's pain is connected to her own guilt with a bond that neither of them can untie, and all that she now can hope for is the belated opportunity to repair the damage that has been wrought between them'. And it means to stand witness to the way Sheila meets a lonely

9. *Another Country*, New York,: Dial, 1962.

death by cancer. The fact that Dorothy after all was the only person who could share Sheila's end with compassion means that Dorothy also can begin to come to terms with her own life, especially her guilt against Sheila, although it was accompanied by a period of nervous breakdown. She is in the process of convalescence and finds in Sheila somebody she can share her intimate world with. That's why Dorothy still treats Sheila as if she is still alive to the confusion of Dr. Williams and Solomon. The fact that Dorothy went to see the black mugger of Sheila whom Sheila did not press charges against in accordance with her own belief shows that Dorothy tries to understand Sheila, although Dorothy found in the mugger a man 'two steps from the jungle.'

The very subtle and sophisticated way of exploring Dorothy's life and its gradual transition reveals how Caryl Phillips perceives human changes in the contemporary world. And this change consists in Dorothy's coming to terms with her sense of guilt against Sheila, which was mediated by crisis in her own life. Her sense of guilt has come from her past inability to sympathize with Sheila in her difficult situation which was due to her conformity to her parent's traditional and narrow way of life and values. But by being confronted with the broken life of hers caused by this conformity, Dorothy now is beginning to understand Sheila's more progressive ideas and understand the 'other' in the form of Sheila. And this experience is behind the relationship between Dorothy and Solomon, a diaspora and her courageous act of charging against the hooligans for the murder of Solomon. After all, to understand the 'other' or Diaspora is to understand the 'other' in her sister.

This novel does not end at the end of the novel. Dorothy, still suffering from a nervous breakdown, is convalescing toward a new human being.

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