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Unsettling History, Nation and Identity in Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon:* A Postcolonial Analysis

[1]Dr. Ashutosh Singh, Assistant Professor, Department of English & Foreign Language, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (A Central University), Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh), India. ashutoshbhu2002@gmail.com
[2]Dr. Sahabuddin Ahamed, Assistant Professor (GF), Department of English, Pt. Sundarlal Sharma (Open) University, Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh), India. ahamedggu@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article critically analyzes how the London-born protagonist Faith Jackson attempts to unfold historical silences about Jamaican heritage and black experiences and rewrite the overlooked interconnected relationships between Jamaica and Britain in Andrea Levy's novel Fruit of the Lemon (1999) in the light of postcolonial theory. It focuses on the role of individuals and nations in denying ethnic minority community's history and identity that is entangled with the legacy of the British Empire. By highlighting the tensions between written colonial archive and individual oral storytelling and emphasizing dialogic and cross-cultural histories and experiences, Levy's novel employs a postcolonial counter-narrative that resists dominant discourses. This article seeks to examine how recognizing entangled and interconnected histories helps Faith understand her family tree, black British experience and hybrid identity and contest racism and discrimination in the contemporary post-imperial moment. The polyphonic novel exhibits how the myth of 'Mother Country' i.e. Britain is transformed into a hybridized postcolonial nation because of the appearance of the post-war mass immigration to the nation since the end of the Second World War. London-born children of Jamaican immigrants attempt to recuperate Jamaican heritage and redefine Britain in relation to Jamaica, thereby reconfiguring the monocultural notions of Britain and Britishness.

Keywords: colonialism, interdependent history, Caribbean legacy, polyphonic narrative, interracial kinship, cultural hybridity, postcolonial Britain

Introduction

> ". . . I used to be so proud that we were part of the British Empire. England was our Mother Country." -- Levy 384
> "British heritage is the heritage of a nation of nations shaped through waves of migration and diaspora, wide-ranging imperial histories and contemporary flows of globalization." -- Littler 1
> "The future is nothing; but the past history, the seed of my present thoughts, the mould of my present disposition." -- Stevenson 90

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Andrea Levy's early writings are semi-autobiographical. Like her female protagonists' black British experiences, Levy was born in London to her Jamaican immigrant parents, Winston and Amy Levy, who came to London from Jamaica on a ship called the "Empire Windrush" in 1948. In an interview, she told Charles Henry Rowell that her prime aim in British literature was "to write books about the present day, about being black in modern Britain, about understanding that diaspora" (264). She wanted to explore all aspects of her life – her duality of belonging – her Caribbean legacy and British identity though her writings. In an essay, "This Is My England," she expresses her concern about having an in-between identity: "Identity! Sometimes it makes my head hurt – sometimes my heart. So what am I? Where do I fit into Britain?" (n. p.). However, her writings examine the relationship between contemporary Britain and its legacy of imperialism in the Caribbean from a postcolonial perspective. By employing narrative strategy what Helen Tiffin called "postcolonial counter-discourse" and Homi K. Bhabha termed "counter-hegemonic strategies," Levy's works resist hegemonic Eurocentric discourses by recuperating and rewriting black experience, history, and identity in the contexts of Jamaica and Britain during and after colonization (99; 171). Her use of counter-narrative is dynamic and fluid in nature as it reconfigures monolithic notions of Britain and Britishness—transforming Britain into a hybridized postcolonial Britain. It also tells the story from the colonized perspective and not from the colonizer's, resulting in a very different story. Levy's black British female protagonists confront and interrogate silences about their past and cultural heritage. They attempt to unfold the existence of the entangled relationships between Britain and Jamaica and their family histories (Gui 78). In addition, they forge a "catachrestic space" that is temporal, hybrid and fluid through multiple ethnocultural exchange and negotiation in a racially homogenous and monocultural host society (Bhabha 183). As they attempt to challenge the holistic notion of British culture and identity. Levy's works emphasize the importance of recording rather than disregarding black people's history in relation to "Mother Country." In this context, Fruit of the Lemon, according to Claudia Marquis, "offers a counter-imperial inscription of black British history and identity formation" (32). In doing so, Levy's young protagonists develop an awareness of the inextricable interconnection between Britain and its former colonies, as well as the evolving dynamics of British culture and identity, while celebrating hybridized and transcultural identity and belonging.

Analysis

Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*, a semi-autobiographical bildungsroman narrative, explores the lived experiences of a North London-born daughter of Jamaican immigrant parents from the "Windrush generation" in the post-war, post-imperial Britain. Set in the 1980s, the novel portrays Faith Jackson's journey of self-discovery-her roots, her family history and her identity: who is she? where is she from and why is she called 'darkie,' outsider? The protagonist attempts to recuperate her family history that is hidden from her by her parents and dominant historiography. She is in search of an identity and looking for a voice to counter racist insults that she experiences in her daily life in the "Mother Country." By challenging repressive historiography which excludes and silences individual stories and memories and by recuperating a complex family history, Faith unveils the larger complex and intertwined histories between Jamaica and Britain during and after the empire (Innes n. p.). Such histories were deeply shaped by British colonialism, slavery,

resistance, exile, displacement, immigration and cross-cultural encounters.

Family Silence and Oral Histories

Faith Jackson, the protagonist, is a second-generation North London-born daughter of first-generation Jamaican immigrants, living in council flat in Stoke Newington, London. As common characteristic features in Levy's earlier novels, including Every Light in the House Burnin' and Never Far from Nowhere, Faith Jackson's parents Wade Jackson and Mildred Campbell are also reluctant to talk about their old times, Jamaican heritage. They ignore her interrogation about their origins before they came to England. She interrogates because she confronts racism and hostility regarding the questions of her familial history and identity. Indeed, they encourage her to tell people that they are English and are from England. They do this to avoid being a stranger, to protect themselves from racial prejudice, not to lose their jobs, to assimilate into the racist society. They do because when they first came to England on Guy Fawkes' night, they faced racism and humiliation: "Everyone called them 'Wog' and 'Darkie.' . . . Nobody wanted them to live in their house, or even in their street" (Levy 390). Moreover, their silence reflects the difficulty of recounting traumatic cultural memory of colonial violence, slavery, resistance, family tree, and forced displacement in the British society that devalues Jamaican histories and Black presence. She reveals why there is no "oral tradition," oral history in her family: "My mum and dad never talked about their lives before my brother Carl and I was born. They didn't sit us in front of the fire and tell long tales of life in Jamaica – of palm trees and yams and playing by rivers." (Levy 2). The family silence, however, creates a void in Faith's understanding of her roots, her identity. As she confesses, "I thought my history started when the ship carrying my parents sailed from Jamaica and docked in England on Guy Fawkes' night. But I was wrong" (Levy 383). It seems that the Jackson family excludes remembering and past experiences from their family history because of their inheritance of "inferiority complex" i.e. psychic wounds left by colonialism (Fanon 4).

From the very beginning, the novel highlights the tensions between the dominant historiography and oral traditions, and it provides an alternative historicity through Faith's aunt Coral's oral histories that emphasizes the pluralities and complexities of the contemporary black British experience. According to Wendy Knepper, "Fruit of the Lemon stands as a novel of transition because of its emphasis on the relations between historiography and vernacular storytelling traditions" (5). In his review of the novel, Bruce King states that "her [Levy's] novel is part of the rewriting of colonial and English history" (146).

Faith's Crisis of Identity

From her history lessons, Faith learns the history of Jamaica, slavery, and Jamaican immigrants in the Britain. Although she thinks of Jamaica as a remote place that has no connection to her family, she later discovers it as a place of the inescapably complex connection to her roots, genealogy, and birth-place, London. It becomes obvious when her parents intend to retire back to Jamaica. She becomes baffled and furious by this decision as why they are announcing to move to a place that they rarely talk of. Her father quietly says, "Because we from Jamaica, Faith" (Levy 50). She gradually becomes aware of institutionalized racism that she unbearably endures inside and outside home in her daily life. She recollects her experience of racism at a primary school where her white English classmates tease her: "Faith is a darkie and her mum and dad came on a banana

boat" (Levy 1). Because of her colour and Caribbean family background, she experiences racial prejudice and xenophobia. She is compelled to suppress her racialized identity, becoming an outsider. Similarly, Carl, her brother is also offended by his white class friends. He is forced to change his name, becoming Trevor to his family and others: "I don't know who you mean, my name is Trevor" (Levy 17). It is ironical that the more Faith attempts to hide her cultural roots, the more prejudice she faces for her blackness. The more she unfolds her family's complex history, the more perplexed she is. Because of her family's connection to the history of slavery shaped by British colonialism what she has learned from her relatives' oral stories. It is historical silences, racism, and personal denial that bring about Faith's identity crisis, culminating in her frustration, nervous breakdown, and emotional distress. However, throughout the novel, her journey of self-discovery facilitates the unveiling of the intertwined histories of Jamaica and Britain, her family tree, her roots, and her cultural identity.

When Faith encounters Andrew Bunyan, a snobbish barrister in an English country pub who inquires about her familial background and cultural roots, she responds to him reluctantly at first that she is an English woman, born and bred but then she asserts that her parents are from Jamaica. The barrister's questions make her feel uncomfortable, invoking issues of racism, exclusion, stereotype, and blackness in public sphere, challenging her identity and belonging:

> "And whereabouts are you from, Faith?'
> 'London,' I said.
> The man laughed a little. 'I meant more what country are you from?' I didn't bother to say I was born in England, that I was English, because I knew that was not what he wanted to hear.
> 'My parents are from Jamaica.'
> 'Well, you see, I thought that,' he began. 'As soon as you walked in I thought I bet she's from Jamaica.'
> 'Just my parents are,' I added but he went on." (Levy 150)

The barrister went on a holiday to Jamaica where he met a black man named Winston Bunyan with whom he had his photograph taken. He goes on to tell Faith that the black man's surname is funny that it is a slave's name. He stresses that her family might had a connection to the man's slave ancestry. Despite being appalled by his statement, Faith at first replies that it might be coincidence but then denies it with 'No.' Though the coincidence is more probable to reveal her identity to the barrister's curiosity, she denies any family connections in Jamaica. It seems that though Faith is born and educated in London, she is never accepted by Londoners as a fully British subject.

Faith works as a costume assistant in the costume department and later as a black dresser at the BBC where she confronts institutionalized racism, prejudice and discrimination. She faces racism when her white colleague, Lorraine, in the costume department, tells her to pursue a position of dresser in a tone of racial difference: "But they don't have black dressers" (Levy 79). Faith overhears Lorraine saying that she does not like black actors to put on clothes the way white actors do. Lorraine's words exhibit her racist and hypocritical outlook as she believes in absolutist and monolithic vision of British culture and identity.

After witnessing a racial attack on Yemi, the black woman, in a London bookshop by three white mobs, Faith does not go to work and move out of her room. She is so shocked by the incident that she disavows her blackness out of fear of being attacked at the hands of racist mobs for her

colour, leading to her estrangement and schizophrenic identity. Her white friends' treatment of the compelling episode distresses her most for their way of looking at the incident, their recount that refuses to blame the culprits and their racist outlook and the cause of the black woman. Their willful un-acknowledgement of the racial assault is responsible for Faith's despair and self-hatred. In such a hostile environment, confronted everyday racism and self-loathing, Faith attempts to accept the conditions of an absence of her social space due to the silences regarding her family ancestors and experiences of racial discrimination.

The period of Faith's despair, self-isolation and estrangement ceases when her parents tell her their plan of moving to Jamaica for a holiday. At first, she feels why they are willing to go there that is a place of no importance for her and then she wants to know why they do not go to Spain or other places. Her mother replies that they should go to the place of their origin: "Child, everyone should know where they come from" (Levy 190). Faith is being told that she is not from England, instead, she is from somewhere else. She is so confused about her trip to Jamaica that it does not make her feel that she or her family have any cultural or familial connection to Jamaica.

Reclaiming Ancestry in Jamaica

Faith leaves England for Jamaica for the first time in her life. After her arrival in Jamaica, she experiences "culture shock," expressing that "I felt out of place" because relatives and new cultural environment are not familiar to her (Levy 197). However, she gradually learns to "adapt to Jamaican ways" (Levy 377). She meets her aunt Coral there, whose oral storytelling provides her with interracial, intersected, transgenerational, and transnational familial histories that span several countries and centuries. Coral's oral histories serve as a counter-discourse to dominant colonial achieve which had erased and overlooked the voices of the colonized. They fill historical and emotional gaps left by Faith's parents' silence and reclaim marginal history, positioning Jamaican experiences at the centre. Coral, Vincent and Violet transmit stories of her family-Eunice, Grace, William, Cecelia, Mildred, Wade and others to Faith through remembrance. From her family members and relatives, Faith comes to know the stories of her family tree-blacks, near whites and browns that span Africa, the Caribbean, Cuba, Scotland, the US, Britain and beyond. According to Pavlina Flajsarova, Levy, in her novel, employs family trees "as a metaphor for searching for ancestral and racial roots, with the ultimate goal of discovering of one's own identity" (n. p.). By listening to these oral histories Faith comes to understand her own identity and recognize the history of her ancestry's connection to slavery, especially Katherine's mother's story of having been enslaved by the English colonizer and plantation owner, Mr. Livingstone. Oral family stories are entangled with the legacy of colonialism and the more complex network of interdependent and intertwined histories that the histories of the colonies and the colonial metropoles are not isolated or separable (Said 96). As Coral tells Faith that "Jamaica was to be part of the British Empire" (Levy 384). Her stories connect Jamaica and Britain across generations of colonization, slavery, migration, displacement and survival. Faith understands that her British identity is inseparable from her Jamaican heritage as her identity is the consequence of the British Empire. Her discovery of the complexities of family history and colonial history makes a sense for her to combat racism and prejudice in contemporary postcolonial Britain. It also becomes a means of healing her sense of estrangement and of reclamation of complex interdependent relationship between Britain and the colonial plantations in Jamica on which Britain's affluent socio-cultural life depends. The stories of the colonizer's involvement in economic exploitation

of and sexual relationships with the colonized women at home and at the plantations reveal the composite, complex, and hybridized nature of the colonial enterprise. For instance, Mr. Livingstone, the English plantation owner, is rumored to have immoral relationships with enslaved women and fathered hundred children by them on his estate. Here the presence of white blood in a slave family and slave blood in a white family suggest the destabilization of racial purity and the essentialist distinction between white and black, thereby unfolding the existence of the complex and mixed-race stories brought about by colonialism. In addition, slave women's bodies become a site of composite and ambiguity that do not belong to a singular category—being neither Black nor white, but mixity—conveying their in-between, hybrid identity. Homi K. Bhabha argues that imperial culture has shifted from being holistic and pure to dialogic and hybrid because of "other 'times' and "other narrative spaces" that challenge rigid cauterization and absolutism (178). In the final moments of the novel, Faith reconstructs her hybrid identity that transcends rigid binary opposition-white vs black, colonized vs colonizer, Jamaican vs British; her Britishness and Jamaicanness are not separate or exclusive but interconnected.

Faith learns from those ancestral stories that her ancestors endured racism, oppression, physical abuse, enslavement, torture and even death, because of their blackness. Racism and 'inferiority complex' were so deeply present in the familial relations and in the formations of black identity, the black individuals refuse to talk about their family histories that treated them inhumanly, resulting in their lives with the feelings of humiliation, discrimination, self-loathing and despair. Oral histories reveal the complicated and intersected histories of past and present, master and slave, colonies and colonial metropolis, East and West, and local and global what Edward W. Said called "contrapuntal" that is the presence of polyphonic voices and cross-cultural and interdependent relationships. According to Said, the legacy of the British Empire is to be viewed as "a network of interdependent histories that it would be inaccurate and senseless to repress" (19). When Faith discovers such complex network of histories of her diverse slave ancestry and of countries where she stays, she reclaims the record of such histories on the one hand, and she does not feel reluctance to be associated with her blackness and her Jamaican heritage that she had previously denied. Now she is glad to announce her Jamaicanness and black inheritance–feeling a renewed sense of identity as British-Jamaican. With an epiphanic realization, she does not become flustered when she is called 'darkie:'

> "Let those bully boys walk behind me in the playground. Let them tell me, 'You're a darkie. Faith's a darkie.' I am the granddaughter of Grace and William Campbell. I am the great-granddaughter of Cecilia Hilton. I am descended from Katherine whose mother was a slave. I am the cousin of Afria. I am the niece of Coral Thompson and the daughter of Wade and Mildred Jackson. Let them say what they lie. Because I am the bastard child of empire and I will have my day." (Levy 385)

Following the revelation of her family history, Faith becomes able to reclaim and reimagine the disavowal and overlooked histories of Jamaica by recording complex and ambivalent familial stories from her family members. The stories seem to make sense for her, her family lineage. As she tells Carol that "before I came to Jamaica I knew nothing about my family" (383). Levy's novel emphasizes the significance of recognizing the entangled and interconnected histories that help Faith understand her family tree, her black British experience and her hybrid identity and contest racial prejudice and discrimination in the contemporary post-imperial moment.

Faith's Counter-Narrative and Fluid Identity

Faith wishes to reconstruct those oral histories to acknowledge her cultural roots in Jamaica, to accept her slave ancestry, and celebrate the transcultural relationships between peoples, cultures, locations, languages, and traditions to which she belongs. More significantly, she learns how the stories of empire, migration, exile, slavery and diaspora have shaped the interdependent histories of Jamaica and Britain, suggesting her Jamaican and black British experience. She acknowledges her Jamaican heritage though her family tree and recovers those neglected histories and reaffirms the intertwined histories of Jamaica and Britain. In this sense, her identity is 'positioned' by dominant discourse that neglects marginal identity and 'repositioned' by herself by her fluid, cross-cultural existence, her reclaiming of hidden histories of Jamaican heritage (her Jamaicanness) and British identity (her Britishness). As Stuart Hall states that cultural identities are constructed in different ways in different contexts—how "we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (225). Her 'liminal' identity is formed out of both racial difference and cross-cultural relationships. As she is torn between two different cultures—being Jamaican outsider and simultaneously a part of mainstream British culture and society—belonging neither fully to Jamaican heritage nor fully to British identity—negotiating the liminal space i.e. "the tension between displacement and dwelling" (Gui 81).

With new forms of agency, visibility and audibility and familial, cultural and historical complexities and interdependencies, Faith develops a form of counter-narrative that contests hegemonic historical narratives that deny and silence the complex, interconnected and cross-cultural historical realties. She insists on rewriting alternative history and nation through ancestral stories and remembrance. Throughout the novel it seems that her ignorance of the past is the cause of her suffering to a great extent. Her transformation is apparent as she is not reluctant to tell people about her parents' connections to Jamaica. Her redemption is obvious as she celebrates her mixed-race identity in a new way that has a tremendous impact on the British society. In doing so, she learns to create a space of her own, to continue her sense of fluid identity and belonging, to have her agency, to claim her British-Caribbean heritage, to challenge racism, and to contest authentic Britishness. This is what Levy wishes to explore in her writings as she announces in an interview with Tracey L. Walters:

> "All my books are about me trying to explore my British Caribbean ancestry, and to place that heritage where I think it belongs – squarely in the mainstream of British history. Britain created those societies for better or worse, and she profited enormously from them. They have been relegated to the margins or, in the case of slavery, almost forgotten. I want to give them a voice, and make that voice an accepted part of our history." ("Andrea Levy" n. p.)

Conclusion

To sum up, Faith's counter-narrative, grounded in her Jamaican heritage, challenges dominant historical narratives and provides an alternative, cross-cultural and heterogenous history. By unfolding neglected connections between Britain and Jamaica, juxtaposing past and present and engaging with the contemporary postcolonial moment, Levy's novel offers a more complex, contested and negotiated vision of history. It gives voice to the silenced experiences of the oppressed and marginalized in relation to the so-called "Mother Country." Consequently, Faith's narrative functions as act of narrative resistance to biased and hegemonic historicity.

Informed by W.E.B DuBois's concept of "double-consciousness," Faith like Levy begins to imagine England her 'home' and herself a Briton, struggling to reconcile her sense of identity and belonging as she is torn between two distinct cultures-Jamaican and British. Through the influence of her parents and her relatives, she comes to learn her Black Jamaican heritage, her family history, and her hybrid British identity. Levy's novel emphasizes the importance of acknowledging intertwined histories and cross-cultural relationships that shape both colonial and postcolonial Britain. By addressing historical and personal silences, confronting everyday racism, highlighting the importance of recollection and seeking out ancestral stories, Faith ultimately realizes the complex, transnational, and mixed-race dimensions of her family history. She comes to understand the interconnected, multicultural and pluralized constructions of Britain and Britishness during and after the legacy of British Empire. John MacLeod observes, 'postcolonial London' undergoes a transition from an "imperial metropolis" to a globalized and transcultural "world city," suggesting the possibilities of immense transformation in the nation's holistic and homogenizing cultural identity (7).

Levy's novel intricately examines the relationship between the imperial past and the post-imperial present through complex narratives of displacement, exile, "Windrush migration," assimilation, acculturation, racism and estrangement. By employing contrasting narrative points-of-view, transnational dimension, Levy reconfigures monolithic notions of national identity and belonging. The novel underscores the intermingling of British standard written traditions with Caribbean oral tradition, reflecting a hybridized multicultural Britain from a postcolonial perspective. The protagonist's engagement with the past and her recovery of neglected histories give meaning to her present condition and illuminate the broader Black British experience in contemporary postcolonial Britain. The relationship between the colonial past and the postcolonial present is not simply presented as a fixed binary opposition but as a shifting, dynamic and transforming way. Both historical moments are inseparable and continuously influence each other in terms of interconnection and interdependency. In this light, Levy's conception of the past is not complete or static, rather, it is incomplete and open and is in process. By uncovering the historical silences and challenging the colonizer's metanarratives regarding history, nation, culture, identity, ethnicity, language and kinship, the novel foregrounds the instability and multiplicity of historical understanding. Its postcolonial implication lies in the act of exposing the erasure of Black histories and experiences, revealing the complex interconnections and cultural admixture born of colonialism and its enduring legacies. Therefore, Levy's work reveals a greater truth of Black British identity and belonging which are continually shaped by intertwined histories of Britain and Jamaica during and after colonialism.

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