

England of Andrea Levy's *Small Island*: Dreams and Realities.

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Andrea Levy's *Small Island* won the commonwealth writer's prize for 2005 apart from other prestigious prizes like Orange Prize for fiction and Whitbread Novel Award. In *Small Island* Levy presents England through the eyes of four protagonists two of whom are Jamaicans and two British. A study of contrast between the dreams and realities as experienced by these protagonists with reference to England is highly rewarding, especially because each one of them makes a conscious move towards reconciliation.

Small Island focuses on the diaspora of Jamaican immigrants who sail to England with a lot of hopes and dreams only to find that the England they arrive at is not the land of their dreams. The historical setting is Britain of 1948 when the ship Empire Windrush arrives from the West Indies with about 500 Caribbeans on board. In his well-researched book *Bloody Foreigners*, Robert Winder records how even as Empire Windrush was still at sea, the Jamaicans were treated as enemies or invaders. "A blunt memo went up on the ship's notice board. It said, 'conditions in England are not as favourable as you may think... Hard work is the order of the day. If you think you cannot pull your weight, you might as well decide to return to Jamaica, even if you have to swim the Atlantic.'"¹ And there were Caribbeans on board who were Ex-servicemen, men like Gilbert Joseph of *Small Island* who had volunteered for the RAF when Britain needed them to fight World War II. What makes Levy's attempt unique is that she not only speaks of what the identity crises following immigration meant for the black Caribbeans who arrived but also what it meant to the white Britons amongst whom the Caribbeans came to settle down. The theme of contrast between dreams and realities, is, therefore closely related to the subject of immigration.

The disillusionment suffered by the four protagonists as the stark reality they are forced to face in England is in sharp contrast to the dreams they had entertained. From the moment Hortense arrives in England, it is as if she is taken on a conducted tour of disillusionment after disillusionment. Chapter one begins with Hortense remembering Celia Langlay's dream of living in England. But it is Hortense who had succeeded in sailing on the ship as big as the world to arrive in England. Her husband Gilbert was not there to receive her as promised. She is forced to hire a cab and her taxi driver finds her best English unintelligible. Her accent that had taken her to the top of her class in Miss. Stuart's English Pronunciation Competition, her perfect recitation of Keats' 'Ode to the Nightingale' that earned her a merit star in Jamaica and the honour of ringing the school bell for one week, gets her nowhere in England. The driver asks her if she has written the address down on a piece of paper, as he is unable to follow her pronunciation. More disillusionment awaits her once she reaches "home". The

small shabby room that accommodates a sink with a rusty tap, a broken chair that rested one uneven leg on the Holy Bible, a window with a torn curtain was to be her new home in London and the appalled Hortense asks her husband, "Just this? Just this?...Is this the way the English live?" Gilbert replies, "Yes, many English live worse than this."²

The feeling of racial superiority drives the English to presume ignorance, backwardness and lack of sophistication on the part of the coloured. The taxi driver asks Hortense to ring the bell and adds "You know about bells and knockers? You got them where you come from?" The lady from Jamaica who thinks she can teach in England is being taught superfluous things at every stage. Queenie educates her on what is a grocer's shop and a butcher's shop. To quote Hortense, "Mrs. Bligh was a punctilious teacher. The shop with meat in the window she tells me is a butcher. That one with pretty pink cakes is the baker." Coming to a shop selling cloth Hortense is disgusted with the way bolts and bolts of cloth lay spread all over the floor- some of it ragged, some of it fraying while two women crawled on their hands and knees through the mess. She can't believe the English treat their new cloth material like this? She recalls how in Jamaica all the cloth is displayed neatly in rows for one to peruse the design and colour. When you have chosen you point to the bolt after which the assistant will take up the cloth for measuring.

But England does teach many things to Hortense. One is that the English are not as hygienic or clean as she expected them to be. For instance, Hortense expects the loaf of bread to be wrapped before it is put into her shopping bag and is disgusted to see the shopkeeper enclose his big hand over the loaf, his freckled fingers spreading across it. As he pushes the loaf she could see a thin black line of dirt arching under each fingernail. Mrs. Bligh's gesture completes this disgusting procedure. Her dirty hand pinching the loaf, she places it into the shopping bag. Hortense says, "My mind could not believe what my eyes had seen. That English people would buy their bread in this way." Hortense, who is described by her husband as "Miss Stick up your nose in the air" is further scandalised learning about the English habits from Gilbert. Gilbert brings fish and chips home, gets out two plates neatly stacked in the cupboard, places the food on the plate and tells her, " You know what the English do? They eat this food straight from the newspaper. No plate. Nothing."

Hortense is not worried about being thrown out of the dingy dilapidated room in Nevern Street. 'You forget,' she assures her husband Gilbert, 'that I will soon have employment in a good school as a teacher... a room such as this is not befitting for a teacher as I'. The two letters of recommendation she carries puts her in high spirits for she presumes that they contain words that will open up the doors of any school. The certificate from Jamaica declared that her teaching skills were proficient. She presents herself at the office of the Education Authority displaying her excellent 'English' manners! The white women at the desk don't

even acknowledge Hortense's civil greeting, let alone reciprocate. The letters of recommendation that she carried so carefully and proudly mean nothing to the woman at the desk. The white lady plays with the letters flicking them against her fingers despite Hortense's repeated requests to see the contents of the letters. The unopened letters are returned to Hortense with the remark, 'I'm afraid you can't teach here.' The naïve Hortense still believes she has not made herself understood but the stark reality strikes her when the woman says, 'These letters don't matter. You can't teach in this country. You are not qualified to teach here in England.' As Gilbert sums up the encounter, it is Hortense 'reeling wounded after a sharp slap from the Mother Country's hand'. The slap has its blessed effect as we soon see. The insufferable, proud woman sporting snow white gloves, the snob who would not acknowledge the unrefined coloured men, behaves in a very civil manner to the coloured man with stained trousers and dirty shoes who tells her, 'Cold day today Miss'.

To Gilbert, the post war England of 1948 is not the England of his dreams. He is offered the lowest paid jobs in this land of 'opportunity' despite the fact that he had rushed to the succour of the 'Mother Country' during her hour of crisis! He recalls how not only he but every one of the R.A.F volunteers had looked upon England as their mother country. "The finest, best things are sent for the mother country as gift . When she needs help no price is too much. Leave home, leave familiar, leave love. Travel seas... shiver, tire, hunger'. No sacrifice is too much.' But the mother is not at all what the Jamaicans imagined her to be. She is a filthy tramp, ragged, old ... a stinking cantankerous hag who offers you no comfort after your journey. No smile. No welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says, 'who the bloody hell are you?' Like other members of British Colonies, Gilbert and other Caribbeans had learnt everything about Britain right from their school days. As Gilbert puts it "Ask any of them, where in Britain ships are built, where is cotton woven, steel forged, cars made, jam boiled, cups shaped, lace knotted, glass blown, tin mined, whisky distilled." You will get the answer. But when an English Tommy is asked where Jamaica is, he may reply 'Well dunno. Africa ain't it'. Ask an English lady what she knows of Jamaica, she may say, 'Jam-What?'

Gilbert, who joined the war wanting to be a pilot is given a truck driver's job. Most of the small islanders had to accept ground staff duty though they had originally volunteered for the air crew duty. When the sergeant asks Gilbert if he can drive a car, Gilbert says, No, sir, though he is used to driving from the age of ten. However, he accepts the duty assigned to him and is off to be trained to do something he had been doing since the age of ten. His effort to reconcile his dream with reality is brought out in lines at once ironic and pathetic:

You see there is a list, written by the hand of the Almighty in a celestial book, which details the rich and wonderful accomplishments his subjects might

achieve here on earth: father of philosophy, composer of the finest music, ace pilot of the skies, paramour to lucky women.

Now I knew: beside the name of Gilbert Joseph was written just one word – driver. All endeavours to erase, replace or embellish were useless.

Gilbert also had dreams of studying law in England as the colonial office had rehabilitation courses for RAF volunteers. But when he filled in his application, the heads in the colonial office shook and tongues tutted and of course Gilbert knew he had no chance. Back home, his cousin Elwood teases him, “ You no study the law yet, man? Me think you come back a judge. You no tell me the Mother Country no keep their word?”

No, the mother country did not keep her word. Once the war is over, he is no longer in the RAF uniform. He realises how the uniform had made his coloured skin partially acceptable. Now he is only a darkie seeking a job. The very arrival of the coloured immigrants was looked upon as a problem. Robert Winder points out that in 1948 the colonial office was afraid that the coming of Windrush might set a trend. One of the memos stated that the British should not make any special efforts to help the Jamaicans lest further influx is encouraged. Now, influx was no new problem in Britain. It was the colour of the immigrants that was the problem for, between 1947 and 1949, 6500 Italians had arrived to work in factories and foundries in Britain. “Irish workers were pouring into Britain in the decade after the war at the rate of sixty thousand per annum, a migration that dwarfed the trickle of hopeful jobseekers from the West Indies.”³ Evidently it was racial prejudice that drove the British to put up such a resistance.

Coming back to Gilbert we see that he is given a letter of introduction from the Force’s labour exchange concerning a job as a store man. He is received civilly enough as an ex-RAF man but the employer apologises for not being able to give him the job. The reason – “You see, we have white women working here. Now, in the course of your duties, what if you accidentally found yourself talking to a white woman?” Not able to understand the import of the question, Gilbert answers, “ I would be very courteous.” The employer explains to him that all hell would break loose if the black man was found talking to the white woman.

Gilbert faces a series of frustrations. In his own words, one look at his face and the job vanishes. The only job he manages to get after so many disappointments is that of a postman driver for the Post Office. The ex-R.A.F. man learns to love his permanent driving licence. “ Man, I was as jubilant as a boy on his birthday, when my hands finally caressed the cold of a steering wheel,” he says. But then again, whites refuse to co-operate with him for they expect ‘trouble’. At King’s Cross he does not know which of the sacks from the train were meant for Post office sorting. When he asks, the other workers won’t answer but only chuckle. When he ignores them and lifts a sack, they shout, “Look, a darkie is stealing from the railways.” Gilbert continues to be polite because he cannot

afford to get into trouble and lose his job. When he gets back home he finds that Hortense is washing the floor. Seeing her hands and knees on the floor he screams , "Get up, get up," and adds, "I cannot see you on your knees so soon No wife of mine will be on her knees in this country, hear me ?" That clearly reveals to us the humiliation he had been subjected to.

Queenie too had her dreams. Daughter of a butcher, she is sick of the blood, muck and stink, the sounds of slicing, chopping and sharpening in the butcher's farm. The maid-of-all-drudgery, Queenie, dreams "Any boy I was going to walk out with would have to court me in a collar and tie, with a freshly scrubbed neck and a wage packet about him." She dreams of going to dances, larking with men who had Clark Gable hair and whispered in her ear that she was as pretty as an English rose. Her legs caressed in silk stockings, a painted toe and a delicate heel she should step out of a car with a wavy hair and trailing lily-of-the-valley scent! Queenie grabs at the invitation extended by aunt Dorothy to live in London. After a while, the aunt approves of Bernard going out with Queenie. Queenie doesn't like many things about Bernard as for instance his dithering over change, the way he screws up his face as if he wanted to dislodge a tickling hair from his nose. She asks aunt whether she thinks they are courting and the aunt replies, "Of course you are courting." "Is that all courting is?" asks Queenie. Girls who were courted should look dreamy eyed, floating on feet that never felt the ground, pluck daisies sighing "he loves me, he loves me not." Queenie tells Bernard that she is not interested in seeing him any more. But the aunt's unexpected death and the mother's suggestion that she can come back to the farm, forces her into a decision. She decides to marry Bernard Bligh only to avoid going back to the muck and stink of the butcher's farm.

Contrast the war years in England with the life Queenie had dreamt about. When several parts of London were bombed out, Queenie works a twelve to fourteen hour shift at a rest centre helping the people who were dislodged from their homes due to the bombing. The bombed out people had to live through the calamity of a world blown to bits and it was Queenie's job to find out who they had once been and where they had once lived. She directs them to the right places, tells them the procedure to make various claims, even lends them furniture from her own home. When Bernard objects to lending their furniture, Queenie replies, "It is doing nothing upstairs, just sitting in those rooms covered in newspaper. We'll not miss them before they are back." England at war brings more and more dislocations. Bernard volunteers for the RAF and gets posted to India. His father, a mentally deranged old man, is left under Queenie's care. She has no idea whether or if Bernard will come back. There is no letter from him, no news about him. Queenie's disillusionment with life in England is writ large in the lines, "I had had enough of war. Come on, let's get back to being bored." Even after the war is over Queenie's problems continue. There is no news about Bernard's whereabouts and she is forced to take in coloured lodgers

in order to survive no matter what the neighbours think. Queenie reconciles with reality much more admirably than do the other protagonists, because she is enterprising and practical.

The shocks of circumstance force the protagonists to face reality. And it is not only the blacks who receive it. The whites receive it too. Bernard Bligh who is posted to India during the war years is shocked when he returns to England. The mighty empire had shrunk into a small island. The war battered England is unrecognizable and exhausted. Bernard feels that streets, shops, houses bored down like crowds, stifling even the feeble light that got through. 'I had to stare out at the sea just to catch a breath'. Bernard cannot suffer a darkie on his street." What a sight! On our street." The second shock follows soon when he realizes that the white woman accompanying the coloured one is his own wife Queenie. He is yet to learn that his wife has been accommodating coloured tenants to make ends meet. Bernard wants to know about his father who was left under Queenie's care. Queenie breaks down as she narrates the circumstances leading to 'pa's' death. She gets hysterical as she recalls how the Yankees shot him on the road during a riot. Her screeches bring the anxious Gilbert to the door. As he knocks the door loud Bernard is forced to open it. Gilbert looks past Bernard and

shouts 'Queenie, Queenie, are you alright?' Gilbert has no idea who Bernard is. Bernard's shock is thoroughly understandable - a coloured man gate crashing into his house, addressing his wife Mrs. Bligh by her first name---absolutely outrageous! Recovering from the bout of hysteria Queenie introduces the two men to each other. As Gilbert puts out his hand for a handshake, Bernard closes the door on his face. We realise that not only has England shrunk, the Englishman's mind and heart have shrunk too! Bernard's behaviour is appalling but Levy has given his point of view and built up the narration in a way that makes the reaction natural to his character. In fact from Bernard's point of view Gilbert is no tenant- he is simply a cheeky blighter!

Now, how would Bernard react to his wife delivering a black baby! Levy handles it ingeniously by describing his reactions to earlier happenings - events that are harmless so that the intensity of Bernard's shock, bitterness and pain may be imagined by the reader. The reaction, if it can be called one, is described from Queenie's point of view. When Queenie describes the circumstances leading to the affair and the pregnancy Bernard is totally silent, but the silence vibrates with pain and outrage. To quote Queenie,

There are some words once spoken split the world in two. Before you say them and after. He listened to me right through. Never saying a word. Never interrupting or wanting a clarification. Never tutted, shook his head. Never once exclaimed 'Oh, Queenie, how could you?' He sat across

from me at the table smoking a cigarette, gently tapping off the ash. But his eyes never lifted to look at mine, not even a glance. When I'd finished – when there was no more worth saying – he scraped his chair back across the lino, stood up and left the room. And for the first time I was thankful that Bernard Bligh could be relied upon to have absolutely nothing to say.

If, as Forster says, the test of a round character is whether he is capable of surprising in a convincing way,⁴ Bernard Bligh is certainly a round character. When he objects to Queenie's decision to give away the baby to the Jamaican couple we are certainly surprised. When the equally surprised Queenie says, "Bernard, we can't look after him. Don't you see?", Bernard answers earnestly, 'why ever not?'. He is sure they can bring up Michael and give him a home. And how would a white couple explain a black baby? Well, there has been a war and all sorts of things happen during a war. A black baby who was orphaned was adopted by them – as simple as that! Queenie's reaction is that Bernard had no right to be so sensible, so just and so caring! Answering a question on the way the character of Bernard was conceived Levy says, "He was a man who had been brought up to see the world in one way – to believe himself, as a white Englishman, to be superior to almost everyone else. ... I was never tempted to make him an all round bad man because I personally never believed he was – misguided, foolish, bigoted, stubborn maybe, but not at all bad."

Levy prepares to convince us for this change in the short scene where Bernard enters the room where Queenie is sleeping with the baby. It is not only one of the most moving scenes in the novel but one of the most convincing ones as well. Bernard hears the baby's whimpers and enters the room. Queenie is asleep and the baby's puckering lips are about to yell. To quote Bernard, "I put my hand down. Held it gently to his stomach. I rubbed it little and his expression changed. ... happy to have me there. His tongue tasting his lips. Gave him my little finger to hold. He grabbed it tight. Tiny black fingers wrapping around. Sound grip. Then quite a pull to get it to his open mouth. Was soon sucking on my finger ... he sucked like it was nectar. Quite content. Actually, he was a dear little thing." The other coloured persons are to Bernard, wogs or darkies or coons or blighters but the baby is a dear little thing.

Bernard's feeling of white superiority was a dream. Gilbert squarely presents the reality to him. The white Bernard and the black Gilbert, the Englishman and the Jamaican have both fought for the empire, fought for peace together. They have fought on the same side so that they could see a better world. If Bernard does not change his racist views, if he does not shed his superiority complex, he is going to fight a never-ending battle with the black man. England changes and so does Bernard. He makes a conscious effort to reconcile himself with reality, with England as it is, not as he thought it ought to be. It is such a move that provides the true momentum to *Small Island*. Incidentally, the novel has been criticized for 'lack of incident' or 'poor

momentum' 5. But, if the focus is shifted from temporal movement to the sensibilities and emotional reactions of the characters, one cannot deny that there is a good deal of momentum. Pain following disillusionment and equanimity following reconciliation with reality provide the right momentum to the novel.

With such a wide gap between dream and reality, pain is inevitable, but Levy's deployment of sarcasm and irony into the narrative makes the pain bearable. In fact, these two elements provide buoyancy to the narrative but for which the disillusionment suffered by the protagonists would be depressing. Consider for instance the shock experienced by Hortense when Queenie instructs her that as a visitor to the country, the blacks should step off the pavement into the road if an English person wishes to pass and there is not sufficient room on the pavement. Not being sure that she had heard right, Hortense asks, "I, a woman, should step into the busy road?" Queenie nods and Hortense continues, "And if there is a puddle should I lie down in it?" Commenting on the white American soldiers, Gilbert wonders if the swagger in their steps was drunkenness or just national arrogance. When the American demands, "Hey you! don't you know to salute your seniors?", Gilbert looks at the badge and thinks, 'perhaps I should not wipe my boots on him but no more respect than that was required.' Kenneth knocks down Bernard by mistake unaware of the fact that Bernard despises his black tenants. When Bernard knocks at the door and shouts, "You have to leave," Kenneth asks, "Why? Is the house on fire?"

The title "Small Island" is closely related to the theme of dream and reality. The phrase Small Island is applicable both to Britain and Jamaica. The British Empire, where they presumed the sun would never set, shrinks back into a small island due to the decolonising efforts in the post-war period. The empire is a dream, the island is a reality. As far as Jamaica is concerned, it is a big island, bigger than all the other islands in the Caribbean. But the Jamaicans who enlisted in the Air Force during the second world war to help the Mother country realised how small Jamaica was compared to Europe and America. After the war they emigrated to England and America, as Jamaica was indeed a small island as far as opportunities were concerned.

Immigration gradually leads to interculturalism, talking of which Levy calls it "both a clash and an accommodation." 6 She explains how in the short term there is shock and conflict, but in the long term cultural diversity makes enriched sophisticated societies. All the protagonists experience the clash and shock when there is a gap between dream and reality. But when they make a conscious and dynamic move towards reconciliation, they create and receive accommodation that enriches personalities and societies.

NOTES

1. Robert Winder, *Bloody Foreigners : The Story of Immigration to Britain* (Great Britain : Little Brown, 2004), 259.

2. *Small Island* (Great Britain:Review, 2004) 22. All references to the text follow the same edition.

3.*Bloody Foreigners*, 262.

4. E.M.Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, rpt.(London:Penguin Books,1990), 81.

5. Book Review, New York Times.

6. Andrea Levy, interview with Sanjukta Dasgupta, included in *Connecting*, published by The British Council, Aug. 2005, 10

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