

Small Island by Andrea Levy (Review)

The theoretical face of post-colonialism is a somewhat unsmiling one: theorists like Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and Abdul Jan-Mohamed are celebrated for their austere insights rather than for their readability or humour. They provide tools for analysis and a highly specialised vocabulary, fodder for academic conferences rather than refreshment for the spirit.

A novel like *Small Island*, then, serves as a corrective to the earnestness of post-colonial theory: it is as acute an analysis of a society in transition as any offered by the theorists, but it is fully grounded in the messy, contradictory human realities of that situation.

Attitudes are played off against one another, not as stark contrasts, but often in an amusing counterpoint of interlocking prejudices. This is how one of the central characters, Hortense, a Jamaican immigrant literally fresh off the boat, experiences the “Mother Country”:

“I put on my best accent. An accent had taken me to the top of the class in Miss Stuart’s English pronunciation competition. My recitation of ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ had earned me a merit star and the honour of ringing the school bell for one week. But still this taxi driver did not understand. ‘No, sorry, dear, have you got it written down or something? On a piece of paper? ...’ I showed him the letter from my husband, which was clearly marked with the address.

‘O, Nevern Street – twenty-one. I’ve got you now..... This is the place you want, dearJust go and ring the bell. You know about bells and knockers? You got them where you come from?’ He mouthed the last words with the slow exaggeration I generally reserved for the teaching of small children. It occurred to me then that perhaps white men who worked were made to work because they were fools.”

The complex weave of social attitudes produces a subtle comedy more flexible than a theoretical analysis, such as offered, for instance, by Abdul JanMohamed, of “the central feature of the colonial cognitive framework and colonialist literary presentation: the Manichean allegory – a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other.”

These oppositions can all be found in this novel, no doubt, but never in any schematic way. Levy deals with the roots of behaviour, not with abstract “cognitive frameworks”. If these characters are in transition between a colonial and a post-colonial state, they are not really aware of it, being much more concerned with the simple business of staying alive and warm.

Most of the action is set in London in 1948: a dreary, bombed-out wasteland of rationing and racism, where the fruits of victory are less evident than the price of the struggle. To this land of penury come the new Britons, the inhabitants of the colonies who, drafted or recruited into the cause of “the Mother Country” during the war, now expect the mother to take her children to her bosom.

Levy concentrates her story on Gilbert Joseph, a Jamaican who joined the RAF during the war and has now returned to England to find a job and a future. Following him to England is his wife, Hortense, a genteel “light-skinned” Jamaican who marries Gilbert in order to gain entry to England. Here she moves into his lodgings with Queenie Bligh, a refugee of another kind: as Hortense married Gilbert to escape from Jamaica, Queenie married her dull husband Bernard to escape the rigours of life on a Midlands farm, having grown up believing herself superior to her surroundings: “I knew from

the first day that I ever walked into Bolsbrook Elementary School that I was a cut above the miners' children.”

Levy amusingly shows that colonial attitudes are not simply those of the colonisers to the colonised: the colonial subject cooperates with enthusiasm in adopting the value system and field of reference of the colonial centre. While still in Jamaica, conscious of being the (illegitimate, but still...) daughter of a highly respected man, Hortense looks down, with more condescension than grammar, on her fellow-Jamaicans:

“When you are the child of someone such as he, there are things that are expected that may not be expected of someone of a more lowly persuasion. And so it was with I.”

Proving worthy of her high birth, she scores a great success by reciting the speech of Henry V before the Battle of Agincourt, “holding my head aloft, so my chin could rise with the dignity of the oration, and to end with a genteel cry, but not too loud, for Harry, England and St George.”

Hortense's husband, Gilbert, is more simply drawn as a victim of the racism of the Mother Country, watching with a mixture of dismay and amusement as his prissy new wife is left “reeling after a sharp slap from the Mother Country's hand” by the brutal rudeness of genteel England. To him are given the more thoughtful reflections on the injustices of colonialism, but even he is never merely a mouthpiece for postcolonial sentiment.

But part of Levy's even-handedness is that she also shows us the process from the point of view of the English, in particular that of Queenie. With her husband on active duty in India, she takes in lodgers, and being largely free of the racial attitudes of her neighbours, offers one of the few refuges in London for the Jamaican immigrants.

Things come to a head, though, when the husband inconveniently returns and proves far less accommodating of difference and diversity than his somewhat atypical wife.

Levy contrives a satisfying ending of some neatness and ingenuity, without thereby suggesting that a bright non-racial future awaits these characters. But she is herself the daughter of Jamaican parents, and this wonderfully comprehensive, humane book in itself offers the strongest proof of the enrichment of the Mother Country through the children she so grudgingly took to her breast. It recently won the Orange Prize – which, as honours go, sure beats getting to ring the school bell.