

"Representations of Multicultural Society in Contemporary British Novels"

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Abstract

This article looks at some representations of English multiculturalism in contemporary literature, and tries to see whether white British writers depict multiculturalism as completely and as accurately as black British writers. This question will be examined through the analysis of two novels by black British authors – *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith and *A Distant Shore* by Caryl Phillips – and two novels by white British writers – *The Light of Day* by Graham Swift and *Saturday* by Ian McEwan. While blackness is directly addressed in *White Teeth* and *A Distant Shore*, it does not seem to appear in Swift and McEwan's novels. But despite this fundamental difference, the two white British writers include other types of outsiders in their novels, which implies that they also reject a traditional and imperial conception of Englishness that would include whiteness only. Although in a different way, the white British writers examined here are also concerned with the changes in their society.

In the discussion about the literary representation of British multicultural society, white British writers are often either ignored or criticised because they fail to include rounded racial 'others' in their works. In his essay 'Kingdom of the Blind', Caryl Phillips observes that

[t]he 'colour problem' was debated in parliament, on television, in newspapers, magazines, on the radio. It was the big story of the 50s. Yet where is it represented in the literature? [...]

As the 50s gave way to the swinging 60s, and then to the 70s and 80s, things did not improve. White British writers have continued to write about Britain without seeing any black faces, and the responsibility to represent a multiracial Britain has continued to fall on the shoulders of non-white writers.¹

¹ Caryl Phillips, 'Kingdom of the Blind', *The Guardian*, 17 July 2004 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,4972040-110738,00.html>> (2 November 2005).

I intend to examine this phenomenon through the analysis of two novels by black British authors – *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith and *A Distant Shore* by Caryl Phillips – and two novels by white British writers – *The Light of Day* by Graham Swift and *Saturday* by Ian McEwan.² I thereby hope to counter-balance Caryl Phillips's statement by showing that, though no racial 'other' really appears in Swift and McEwan's novels, these writers' treatment of other types of outsiders testifies to their sensitivity to British multicultural society.

1. A Multicultural or 'Cosy' Version of England?

White Teeth and *A Distant Shore* are novels that directly address multiculturalism in Britain. *White Teeth* tells the story of three families: the Joneses who are half-English, half-Jamaican; the Iqbals, a Bangladeshi family, and the Chalfens, a white English household of Jewish descent. The novel is set in North West London and spans the lives of three generations, with most of the characters being given personality, voice, and thoughts. *A Distant Shore* introduces two protagonists – Dorothy, a white Englishwoman, and Solomon, an African political refugee – who meet and become friends in a village in the North of England before Solomon is killed and Dorothy becomes mad. Phillips's characters also have very developed personalities, and the story is told from their points of view.

Of course, Zadie Smith and Caryl Phillips represent different types of multiculturalism. *White Teeth* presents the reader with a celebration of multiculturalism while *A Distant Shore* gives us, with Solomon's murder and Dorothy's madness, a more pessimistic view of the future of Britain as a multicultural society. But in spite of this difference, the confrontation between the various cultures and points of view making up Britain and/or their adaptation to each other is central to both novels.

However, this representation of racial 'others' does not seem to appear in *The Light of Day* or *Saturday*. Those two novels in particular caught my attention because Graham Swift and Ian McEwan, along with Julian Barnes and Martin Amis, are the authors one immediately associates with 'the "establishment" in contemporary British writing'.³ As a consequence,

² I am aware that the labels *black* and *white* are extremely problematic in the sense that they allude only to the concept of 'race'. I do not mean here to classify the writers on the basis of their 'race' or skin colour; rather, I want to emphasise their respective cultural heritage, but I am obliged to use the terms *black* and *white* because there are no real alternatives to them. In this article, the reader should keep in mind that the word *black* refers to the writers who originate from countries of the former British Empire (with the exception of Australia and Canada), while the word *white* is used to describe the artists whose origins are exclusively British.

³ Merle Tonnie, 'A New Self-Conscious Turn at the Turn of the Century? Postmodernist Metafiction in Recent Works by "Established" British Writers', in *Twenty-First Century Fiction*, ed. by Christoph Ribbat (Heidelberg: Winter, 2005), pp.57-82 (p.57).

many critics have been tempted to see them as writers who can only present, in Kate Flint's words, 'a cosy version of England'.⁴

The Light of Day takes place on 20 November 1997, exactly two years after Sarah Nash murdered her husband Bob after he had just driven his mistress to the airport. The story is narrated by George Webb, the private investigator Sarah Nash had hired to track her husband, and who has now become her lover. The whole novel revolves around Webb's activities and thoughts on that day. *Saturday* is also a circadian novel that focuses on the neurosurgeon Henry Perowne on Saturday 15 March 2003. The novel starts with Perowne watching a burning plane heading for Heathrow, a harbinger of the sense of menace that pervades his life on that day.

Like *White Teeth* and *A Distant Shore*, these two novels also present 'others', but their focus is almost exclusively on the white male English protagonists. In *The Light of Day*, the Croatian political refugee Kristina Lazic, whom Sarah and Bob Nash welcome, plays an important role in the story: she becomes Bob's mistress and by this very fact triggers the drama that is to follow. But despite her crucial position in the story, Kristina is not given any voice or personality. She is reduced to an element of the plot, more precisely to THE perturbing element in the English couple's happy life.

There are also several 'others' in *Saturday*, but most of them are Perowne's patients or colleagues, and they all seem to be only part of his everyday background. Rodney Browne, for instance, comes from Guyana and is one of Perowne's registrars. But the relationship between the neurosurgeon and the Guyanese is strictly professional and, though the reader is sometimes given some information about him, he seems to be only an extra in the story. Andrea Chapman is another black character, of Nigerian origin. She is one of Perowne's patients, a teenager with a brain tumour. She is given some personality traits and appears several times in the story but she seems to stand for one of Perowne's feats as a surgeon rather than for an outsider in Britain. Indeed, Andrea is 'a problem patient'⁵ who only Perowne manages to treat and cure for good. As for Perowne, he is a small-minded man, prejudiced against people who are different, as testified by the way he deals with Baxter and his friends. Baxter is the man whom Perowne bumps into on University Street and who intrudes into the neurosurgeon's house in the evening. He and his friends obviously originate from a different,

⁴ Kate Flint, 'Looking Backward? The Relevance of Britishness', in *Unity in Diversity Revisited: British Literature and Culture in the 1990s*, ed. by Barbara Korte and Klaus Peter Müller (Tübingen: Narr, 1998), pp.35-50 (p.42).

⁵ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), p.8. All further references appear parenthetically in the

much less privileged, social background than Perowne. As a result, the neurosurgeon does not manage 'to take the trio seriously' (S, p.90) and humiliates Baxter by talking about his disease in front of the other two men. Perowne is a man who thinks he does not need to read because 'he's seen enough death, fear, courage and suffering to supply half a dozen literatures' (S, p.4), a man who is 'nostalgic for a verdant, horse-drawn, affectionate England' (S, p.5). All these elements favour Stephen Metcalf's interpretation of the novel as 'a deeply English novel [...] presided [...] by a longing for the old village virtues of peace and continuity'.⁶ They certainly do not call for a reading of *Saturday* as a book open to other cultures and different people.

2. Tolerance to the 'Other' and the Challenge of Englishness

Despite these problems, I would like to argue, as Emma Parker does in her analysis of Graham Swift's *Last Orders*, that *The Light of Day* and *Saturday* are novels that 'point to the inadequacy of imperial conceptions of Englishness',⁷ for they undoubtedly also question a static notion of English identity. These novels therefore convey a message that is not so radically different from that of the black British writers, who generally deal with otherness in their works. As David Bennett remarks, 'multiculturalism [...] clearly signals a crisis in the definition of "nation"',⁸ which suggests that the authors who represent multiculturalism also tend to 'transgress the circumscribed concept of Englishness'.⁹

In *White Teeth*, Englishness is a concept that is continually criticised and deconstructed, as indicated by Alsana's words: 'Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It's a fairy tale!' (WT, p.236).¹⁰ If Irie stands in front of the 'gigantic mirror' of England 'without reflection' (WT, p.266), it is because the concept of Englishness does not correspond to reality. Even Archie feels alienated in England, in spite of the fact that he is a white Englishman with the typical English surname 'Jones'.

Remarkably enough, 'Jones' is also Dorothy's family name in *A Distant Shore*. At first sight, Dorothy might seem to be the quintessential Englishwoman: she drinks tea whenever

text.

⁶ Stephen Metcalf, 'A Day in the Life: How Critics Got *Saturday* Wrong', *Slate Magazine*, 30 March 2005 <<http://www.slate.com/id/2115947/>> (3 October 2006).

⁷ Emma Parker, 'No Man's Land: Masculinity and Englishness in Graham Swift's *Last Orders*', in *Posting the Male: Masculinities in Post-War and Contemporary British Literature*, ed. by Daniel Lea and Berthold Schoene (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003), pp.89-104 (p.90).

⁸ David Bennet, *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.2.

⁹ Susanne Pichler, 'Alien-Nation and Belonging: Ethnic Identities in Selected Black British Novels', *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 29.1 (2004), pp.43-63 (p.48).

¹⁰ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.236. All further references appear parenthetically in the text.

she needs comfort and is obsessed with good manners. However, the only well-behaved man that she meets is Solomon and she describes him as 'a proper gentleman. In fact, one of the first gentlemen that [she]'d ever met' (ADS, p.64).¹¹ Dorothy's ideal gentleman turns out to be an African refugee instead of the white British man we would normally associate with politeness. At the end of the story, Dorothy realises 'that there's no way that [she] can live among these people' (ADS, p.59) and she rejects reactionary England by taking refuge in madness. Dorothy and Solomon's sad endings are obviously a way of disapproving of the fossilised conception of Englishness that paralyses the people in Weston, and by extension in England as a whole.

In a different way, *The Light of Day* and *Saturday* also support a progressive definition of Englishness. It would be simplistic to read Graham Swift's novel as an example of what Kate Flint calls his 'narrow-minded parochialism'.¹² First of all, the narrator chosen by Graham Swift is not a typical white male British character. George Webb is an ex-cop turned private detective. As Hermione Lee has observed, the choice of such a job for the narrator of his novel testifies to Swift's desire to put the 'unliterary, workaday professions'¹³ in the forefront and thus to give a voice to a representative of a less privileged group in British society. Webb does not really correspond to the typical image of masculinity either: he has lived alone for years, is a good cook, and works nearly exclusively with women, whom he deeply respects. Through George's personality then, Swift challenges the class hierarchy and the patriarchal ideology that usually go hand in hand with a traditional conception of Englishness.

The character of Kristina also offers a symbolic resistance to an obsolete vision of Englishness. Indeed, if Kristina seems to be the source of all the problems between Bob and Sarah Nash, she is also the element that brings Sarah and George together in a complex but happy relationship. This might allude to the intricate situation of British society nowadays: Kristina's intrusion into their lives might stand for the confusion and difficulties, but also for the riches that multiculturalism represents for all its actors.

In Sarah and Kristina's mutual teaching of each other's language, Sarah is, in George's words, 'the teacher being the student, starting from scratch' (LD, p.145).¹⁴ This not only

¹¹ Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore* (London: Vintage, 2004), p.64. All further references appear parenthetically in the text.

¹² Flint, p.43.

¹³ Hermione Lee, 'Someone to Watch Over You', *The Guardian*, 8 March 2003, <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/bookerprize2003/story/0,,1019833,00.html>> (9 February 2007).

¹⁴ Graham Swift, *The Light of Day* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.145. All further references appear parenthetically

suggests a reversal of the imperial thought that confers knowledge and civilisation only on the British; it also provides a model for the process of adapting to each other and of accepting what the 'other' has to offer.

The image of the exile in the novel also contributes to illustrating the fact that everybody in Britain is concerned by the change in their country. If Kristina is literally an exile in a foreign country, many of the other characters in the novel are symbolic exiles. After murdering Bob, Sarah loses her son, house and freedom, and is 'deported' to prison for several years. As for George, who is constantly travelling between the prison and his house, he gradually realises that he '[does]n't have a real home anymore' (LD, p.138). Additionally, as a backdrop to the couple's experience of homelessness, Napoleon and the Empress Eugenie, the 'rich refugees' (LD, p.101) in exile in Chislehurst in the 19th century, are omnipresent in the novel. Finally, Bob is also 'in the last hours of his life, in exile from himself.'¹⁵ Sarah's description of him as 'the bloody refugee. The one who doesn't know where his home is' (LD, p.228) associates his predicament with Kristina's, which places British people on the same level as the refugees. This implies that we are all equal in this new world order where, as Caryl Phillips puts it in one of his essays, 'nobody will feel fully at home'.¹⁶

In *Saturday*, the challenge of a conservative vision of Englishness is symbolised by Henry Perowne's gradual change as the day unfolds. Perowne's transformation starts with the burning plane he sees at dawn and reaches its climax with Baxter's violent intrusion into his house and family in the evening. This last incident ends happily – the family are safe and sound, and Baxter is sent to hospital after falling down the stairs – but the fact that the novel goes on for about fifty pages after this fortunate outcome confirms that Perowne's reaction is worth looking at.

Baxter's attack has left a deep mark on Perowne's life and attitude, and has altered his world for ever. The man's invasion of the peaceful circle of the neurosurgeon's family might be read as a reminder of present-day immigration in Britain, but also of the 'terrorism' that threatens most countries at present, two realities that Perowne had until then managed to keep at a distance. However, with Baxter's onslaught, Perowne realises that he cannot ignore the outside world anymore. In the end, his certainties about the war in Iraq and the marchers in London 'have dissolved into debating points' (S, p.287), and he now feels 'timid, vulnerable' (S, p.287).

in the text.

¹⁵ Hermione Lee, 'Someone to Watch Over You'.

¹⁶ Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001), p.5.

Significantly, Baxter is what Perowne's son calls a 'street guy' (S, p.154), which suggests that the lower classes might also have something to teach to the upper classes. When Baxter asks Daisy to read one of her poems, he is incredibly moved by the beauty of her words. Set against Perowne's insensitivity to art and even to his own daughter's performance, Baxter's emotion at that moment proves 'that [he] has an equal value as a human being, and an equal claim to the dignity society confers on Henry'.¹⁷ Even Perowne understands this at the end: he feels guilty that 'he has done nothing, given nothing to Baxter who has so little that is not wrecked by his defective gene' (S, p.236) and even decides to give up the charges against him. As suggested by Perowne's new open-mindedness to people like Baxter and to the outside world, *Saturday* advocates tolerance to the 'others' populating Britain.

3. Otherness vs. Blackness

In light of all this, it cannot be denied that by including 'others' into their novels, Swift and McEwan reflect upon the changes in British society. This suggests that they are as much aware as Caryl Phillips that '[i]f one believed that "England" – or Scotland or Wales – was white then right before your very eyes England was becoming half-English'.¹⁸ It would even be tempting to argue that, given Pichler's definition of the nation as a 'concept that many make use of in order to exclude "Others"',¹⁹ the deconstruction of Englishness suggested in *The Light of Day* and *Saturday* accordingly evokes the inclusion of *all* the 'others' in Swift and McEwan's visions of present-day Britain.

This being said, one cannot simply ignore the fundamental difference that exists between on the one hand Swift and McEwan's novels and on the other *White Teeth* and *A Distant Shore*. As shown in this essay, the white British writers' redefinition of Englishness remains mostly symbolic and allegorical. Multiculturalism and the tolerance of 'others' in Britain are *suggested* in *The Light of Day* and *Saturday*, but are by no means *represented*, since, as pointed out above, the characters standing for otherness in these two novels are only present for the sake of the plot.

Furthermore, the different types of otherness presented in Swift and McEwan's novels do not reflect the reality of multicultural England since they do not include blackness. Because the outsiders in the two novels confront the protagonists with new cultures or

¹⁷ Lee Siegel, 'The Imagination of Disaster', *The Nation*, 11 April 2005, p.6, <<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20050411/siegel>> (26 October 2006).

¹⁸ Caryl Phillips, 'Kingdom of the Blind', p.3.

¹⁹ Pichler, p.45.

different ways of living, it might be tempting to read them as symbols of all the 'others' and of the impressive mixing of cultures that can be observed in England today. However, none of these marginalised people are black – with the exception of Rodney and Andrea, but, as we have seen, they are not important as full characters in *Saturday* – and this restricts the novels' faithful representation of multiculturalism. In *The Light of Day*, Kristina introduces another culture into the lives of Bob and Sarah Nash, and by extension into England as a whole, but her outsideness remains undetected until she speaks. Because she is white, she could be mistaken for a British person, unlike any black or Asian refugee or citizen. This primordial difference reveals that a person's skin colour makes for their ineluctable labelling as 'other' and thus renders their acceptance within a mainly white society even more difficult.

In *Saturday*, Baxter also fulfills the role of an 'other' to which Perowne and England have to adapt. But such a character does not directly relate to British multiculturalism since only his social background distances him from Perowne. Baxter's character merely stigmatises the age-long oppression of the working-class in Britain. There is, however, a character who is more important to Perowne and who is actually a cultural 'other': Jay Strauss, Perowne's colleague and friend, who is American. As testified by Perowne's observation about Jay: 'It took Jay Strauss, an *American* with the warmth and directness that no one else in this *English* hospital could muster, to bring her into line' (S, p.9, italics mine). The United States and Britain have different cultures and it is logical that the English should see an 'other' in an American expatriate. But here again, the cultural 'other' is a white person, which means that his difference is less easily perceived. Even less so when he speaks the same language as the British and his culture is much closer to Perowne's than Kristina's Croatian customs are.

Blackness then appears to be the ultimate otherness and, for all their openness, it is still difficult to claim that Swift and McEwan represent multiculturalism as faithfully as Zadie Smith and Caryl Phillips.

4. Conclusion: Artistic Freedom and Visibility

Perhaps more important than the question of whether white writers depict multiculturalism in their works is whether they have to do so. Salman Rushdie is not of this opinion, for he believes that writers should be judged for what they write, independently of their gender, class or ethnicity. As for Zadie Smith, she fulminates against the fact that black writers are expected to represent their community and are therefore denied the freedom white writers

enjoy. Indeed, is it legitimate to impose a subject matter on writers, black or white, because they live in a multicultural society?

Finally, criticism of white British writers for not representing multiculturalism accurately enough might not be the solution to black people's invisibility in British literature. A more effective position on the part of literary critics and institutions would be to systematically include black British writers within British literature. For, if some novels like *White Teeth* have met with international acclaim as British novels, there are still many black British authors who escape notice from a large audience. What would grant them more visibility is a 'bidding for the mainstream', which according to Barbara Korte and Claudia Sternberg

*does not imply submitting to existing structures of cultural hegemony or simply adapting to a British majority culture whose participants are still largely white. Rather, it means to actively participate in and change a predominant cultural stream whose structures – including market structures – already are in the process of redefinition and which has already set in motion its own decentralisation.*²⁰

In this case, a blurring of the margin-centre distinction in literature, and more generally in culture, could lead to an equality between black and white writers in British literature. As Kwame Dawes remarks: 'Is it not now time for us to do away with the term "Black British Literature", and simply demand that our writing, that is writing by blacks in Britain, be called, simply, "British literature"?'²¹ The four novels I have examined above actually support this point of view. They all question imperial conceptions of Englishness, they all assert that Britain is no longer what it used to be, i.e. only *white*. Nor is British literature, which should become the unique term for all the different literary traditions existing in Britain today. For, if *White Teeth*, *A Distant Shore*, *The Light of Day* and *Saturday* are all set in contemporary Britain and reflect on the current state of England, they do so in very different ways. These different literary responses reveal that the complexity of British society cannot possibly be encompassed by only one novel, voice, or literary style. It is only by keeping the different voices that respond to the same society and by putting them side by side that we will obtain

²⁰ Barbara Korte and Claudia Sternberg, *Bidding for the Mainstream? Black and Asian British Film Since the 1990s* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), p.8-9.

²¹ Kwame Dawes, 'Negotiating the Ship on the Head: Black British Fiction', *Wasafiri* 29 (1999), 18-24 (p.24).

deeper and maybe more complete insight into the nature and complexity of multicultural societies.

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