Madeline Manzagol

June 11, 2021

TA: Harini

Section: Wednesday 11am

Word count: 2022

The Jamaican Experience

After experiencing London for the first time, Hortense, a young Jamaican woman and leading narrator in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, concludes to herself "I have found this to be a very cold country."[1] Hortense's comment highlights Britain's gloomy and disagreeable weather as well as her unpleasant encounters with many of her white counterparts. The duality of her statement sheds light on how life was for a colored woman living in Britain during the 1940s. During the WWII and postwar era, Hortense and many other people of color found themselves presented with a very different and perplexing Britain than they expected. Jamaicans who migrated to Britain during the postwar era are known as the "Windrush Generation." They had been called upon by the British government to help restore the shell shocked economy and were expecting a warm welcome. When they arrived, they were faced with the harsh reality that the white population in Britain felt their racial superiority was being infringed upon and their homeland was becoming infested with colonized subjects. In response, many Britains expressed their discomfort by engaging in acts of racial discrimination. As portrayed by Andrea Levy's novel *Small Island,* and sources from the online British library, Jamaicans who traveled to the Metropol during the World War II and postwar era were subjected to multiple forms of racism: colonial anxiety, white supremacy, and unemployment. The race-induced oppression is presented through the affinity colonial subjects hold for Britain in comparison to the reality, consistent dehumanization felt by Jamaican soldiers, and the estrangement that continued to distance Jamaicans from their white British counterparts.

During the postwar migration period of 1940s to 1960s, the Windrush Generation made their way across the Atlantic, hoping to thrive in ways incomparable to those who remained in Jamaica. Subject to colonial rule, Jamaicans were sent through the British educational system,

---

[1] Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (Great Britain: Headline Publishing Group, 2004), 466.

fostering a fondness for Britain from a very young age and developing a generation of Jamaicans who idealized British culture. However, the Jamaicans who traveled from their homeland were unaware of the anxieties about colonial subjects that were festering within Britain's white populace. During the construction of the British Empire, white subjects justified their economic exploitation of their colonies under the belief that it was a "white man's burden" to civilize the "backward people" living in the foreign lands they wished to utilize. But during WWII and the postwar era, the colonized peoples migrated to the colonizer's homeland, causing Britain's populace to develop anxieties about their "inferior subjects" who expected to live equally amongst them. These anxieties cultivated discriminatory perspectives about colored people, further justifying their belief that Jamaicans possessed inadequate manners and an inferior level of civilization. Hortense was directly exposed to these perceptions, but her character also highlights the ironies of the British perception. Upon her arrival in London, she needed a washing bin. Used to having access to multiple bins—a different one for each chore—Hortense expresses her disgust and disapproval when Queenie remarks she only needs one. Hortense thinks to herself, "How can an Englishwoman expect me to wash myself in the same place where I must clean up the vegetables?"[2] Levy points out the irony and confusion Hortense was faced with by using selective diction and imagery. She selects the word "Englishwoman" to shed light on the idea that an Englishwoman, someone in society who is considered to hold themselves to the highest level of sophistication, is partaking in what a Jamaican would consider unhygienic practices. The image of washing a dirty body in the same wash bin used for vegetables before they are eaten immediately creates a sense of disgust that tarnishes the facade of the "pristine" white race. A similar consensus was also reached by others in the Windrush Generation as many Windrushers felt as if England wasn't advanced enough as a country for the Jamaicans to

[2] Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (Great Britain: Headline Publishing Group, 2004), 374.

comfortably establish themselves within.[3] The disillusionment felt by many migrant Jamaicans highlights the deception embedded within Britain's superior culture and lifestyles, cleverly masking their inherent racist qualities and perceptions of their colonial subjects. By belittling colored people, white people in Britain fueled the perceived racial divide, characterizing colored people as dirty and contaminated.

Colonial migrants weren't the only ones that found themselves dismayed at the disrespect and prejudices towards people of color at the time; Jamaican soldiers were often subjected to racist remarks and actions perpetrated by white British and American soldiers and army personnel. Their white counterparts often stripped Jamaican soldiers of their identities, lumping all cultures and heritages of the colored races into one existence: black. Through the discreditation of their colored peers, caucasian soldiers found it easier to express their perceived racial superiority. Gilbert, a young Jamaican soldier in Levy's novel, became a prime example of such actions. Levy utilized Gilbert's wartime memories as a mechanism to vividly express the verbal and physical accounts of racial bias. Gilbert made a supply run to an American army base where he overhears the general outraged that a colored man was sent to collect war necessities. With Gilbert right outside his door, the general angrily shouts, "These [colored men] are more trouble than they're worth."[4] Unaware of Gilbert's skills as a driver and loyalty to the war effort, the general illustrated how white people at the time had little to no respect for the character and ability of colored people. Only knowing that Gilbert was colored, the general immediately concludes that Gilbert is unfit for his task, showcasing the white perspective of racial superiority. Ironically, whites were ignorant to the fact that the Allies' armies in WWII were supported by

---

[3] Verona Franceta Pettigrew, "'We Jamaicans in 1950s England' from the Daybook of Mrs Pettigrew," *British Library*, (October 4, 2018): https://www.bl.uk/windrush/articles/we-jamaicans-in-1950s-england-from-the-daybook-of-mrs-pettigrew.

[4] Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (Great Britain: Headline Publishing Group, 2004), 170.

outsourcing extended help from the British Empire, making colored soldiers extremely valuable to the war effort. Many colored soldiers also experienced physical abuse from their white counterparts. During a wartime break, Gilbert accompanies Queenie to the movies with her white father-in-law Albert. He refuses to sit in the back of the theater and argues with the stewardess, multiple GIs, and American soldiers, claiming that "this is England not Alabama" and therefore he shouldn't have to conform to the racial segregation the colored people in America were forced to abide by.[5] When it became apparent that his claim hadn't shifted the stewardess and GIs' views, the audience was ushered into the streets where a chaotic racially induced fight broke out. It wasn't until Albert, an innocent bystander, was shot and killed that the fight dissipated. The fight symbolizes the extent to which whites felt the need to exert their believed racial dominance. Intense racist and xenophobic outbreaks were so common that colored soldiers were mistreated and misunderstood in such drastic ways that the white populace became ignorant to the services and participation many Jamaican soldiers contributed to the war effort.[6] Many colored people, who believed the purpose of engaging in war was to squash hatred, questioned whether or not there was a different, racial war, being fought.

Similar to the colored soldier's wartime experience, Jamaicans residing in postwar Britain felt juxtaposed to their white counterparts. Many had feelings of excitement as their ships left the coasts of Jamaica; however, those feelings of excitement were quickly squashed upon docking as Britain quickly revealed itself to be a foreign and unwelcoming land. As Jamaicans were immediately subjected to social discrimination and exiled into inferior roles in society, many became disillusioned. Their affinity to Britain that was so deeply ingrained in their

---

[5] Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (Great Britain: Headline Publishing Group, 2004), 210.
[6] Hannah Lowe, "An introduction to Andrea Levy's *Small Island*," *British Library*, (October 4, 2018): https://www.bl.uk/windrush/articles/an-introduction-to-andrea-levys-small-island.

perception of the Metropol began to wash away as the true beliefs of their white counterparts began to show. Throughout *Small Island*, Hortense was constantly reminded of this betrayal as she was placed in situations that leave her upset and confused. One of the ways her disillusionment was fueled was through the mindless, yet inherently racist comments made by Queenie. During a trip to the market, Queenie assumed that Hortense was experiencing the marketplace for the first time and explained the different foods to purchase, in doing so, displaying her subconscious racist belief that Jamaicans are uncivilized. Hearing Queenie's uncalled for explanations, Hortense thinks to herself, "She think me a fool that does not know what is bread?" when Queenie believes she was introducing Hortense to bread.[7] Queenie's belief that Hortense was unfamiliar with a common staple such as bread, comments on the deeply rooted racist convictions that English people held. Such trends remained present in other aspects of colored people's lives, as whites perpetuated their inaccurate beliefs in openly racist ways. Queenie's husband Bernad exemplified this trend by stating, "It would be a kindness to return them to the backward place they came from."[8] Levy pinpointed the distinct repulsion the white populace felt towards the Windrush Generation by equating the possible return of Jamaicans to their homeland to a favor. Because white people in Britain were too caught up in colonial and racial superiority anxieties, whites became so focused on the outward appearance of their colored counterparts to acknowledge, let alone learn, that Jamaicans often received higher education than the British themselves.[9] Unfortunately, the colonial and racial angst held by the white British public was projected so openly and broadly that Jamaicans felt continuously targeted, mistreated, and displaced.

---

[7] Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (Great Britain: Headline Publishing Group, 2004), 372.
[8] Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (Great Britain: Headline Publishing Group, 2004), 519.
[9] Verona Franceta Pettigrew, "'We Jamaicans in 1950s England' from the Daybook of Mrs Pettigrew," *British Library*, (October 4, 2018): https://www.bl.uk/windrush/articles/we-jamaicans-in-1950s-england-from-the-daybook-of-mrs-pettigrew.

In response to white anxieties regarding their Empire coming home, the Jamaican immigrants often found themselves in situations where employers actively deskilled and rejected many colored applicants. Gilbert was a prime example of an educated and able young man who was forced to accept work at a level far below his skill level. The image of colored men working alongside white female and male counterparts irked white employers enough to declare was was inappropriate to hire colored people. When looking for a job in postwar Britain, Gilbert got rejected from six different jobs with the same racist reasoning: it was unfit for a person of color to be working in a pristine area where only white British people worked. Traveling from job to job, Gilbert was faced with the same message "We can't use your sort."[10] It wasn't until he found himself at the post office that he was hired as a driver—a position that completely disregarded his education and ability. This racially infused behavior is also exemplified when Hortense was rejected from the teaching job she had trained for her whole life. Sitting face to face with her interviewer, she was told, "You're not qualified to teach here in England."[11] Although she managed to make a teaching career out of sewing, Hortense never received justice for the deskilling she was subjected to. The unwillingness to hire Hortense highlighted the racially-created presumption that a colored person would never be suited to work amongst the superior white race. Many others in the Windrush Generation were also subjected to the racially motivated deskilling that took place during the postwar period. The majority of migrants took jobs of "a lower status than their skills and experience qualified them for."[12] The assumption that colored people were inferior to whites in the work center illustrates how the white populace of Britain acted on the anxieties of colonial homecoming and their perception of their "pristine"

---

[10] Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (Great Britain: Headline Publishing Group, 2004), 350.
[11] Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (Great Britain: Headline Publishing Group, 2004), 502.
[12] Linda McDowell, "How Caribbean migrants helped to rebuild Britain," *British Library*, (October 4, 2018): https://www.bl.uk/windrush/articles/how-caribbean-migrants-rebuilt-britain.

race. As a result, many Jamaicans felt a rude awakening as their racist counterparts inflicted discrimination across virtually every aspect of daily life.

Andrea Levy's novel *Small Island* and multiple sources from the online British library showcased how Jamaicans who migrated to Britain during World War II and the postwar era were exposed to extreme racism that took the form of colonial anxiety, white supremacy, and unemployment. Moreover, these forms of racism affected genders differently, but ultimately still delivered the same, unfriendly message. The racially infused discrimination was illustrated through the bigoted British perception, the induced inferiority felt by Jamaican soldiers, and the disillusionment that steadily separated Jamaicans from the white British public. The racially motivated behaviors of the white populace towards Jamaicans was a direct response to the anxieties and fears white people felt about the arrival of their colonial subjects in Britain. The xenophobic messages sent to Jamaicans by their white peers became a key factor in shaping their relationships with white people, retailoring their identities, and dissembling their affinity to Britian—all of which have left a lasting legacy that can be seen in modern society today.

Bibliography

Levy, Andrea. *Small Island*. Great Britain: Headline Publishing Group, 2004.

Lowe, Hannah. “An introduction to Andrea Levy's *Small Island*.” *British Library*, (October 4, 2018): https://www.bl.uk/windrush/articles/an-introduction-to-andrea-levys-small-island.

McDowell, Linda. “How Caribbean migrants helped to rebuild Britain.” *British Library*, (October 4, 2018): https://www.bl.uk/windrush/articles/how-caribbean-migrants-rebuilt-britain.

Pettigrew, Verona Franceta. “‘We Jamaicans in 1950s England’ from the Daybook of Mrs Pettigrew.” *British Library*, (October 4, 2018): https://www.bl.uk/windrush/articles/we-jamaicans-in-1950s-england-from-the-daybook-of-mrs-pettigrew.