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“I am the bastard child of the Empire”: Women and Hybrid Identity in Andrea Levy’s Fiction

Abstract

In the novels published in the course of the nineties, *Every Light in the House Burnin’* (1994), *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996), and *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), Andrea Levy (1956–2019), a British writer of Jamaican origin, focuses on the experiences of British-born daughters of first-generation Caribbean immigrants in Britain. This paper will examine how Levy’s young protagonists struggle to come to terms with their highly hybridized identities, which resist reductive racial categories of ‘white’ and ‘black.’ Experiencing racial bias on the one hand and confronting silences about their Jamaican heritage on the other, Levy’s protagonists often find themselves in liminal spaces and are constantly compelled to negotiate private (Jamaican) and more public (British) spheres of existence.

Keywords: Andrea Levy, Stuart Hall, womanhood, British, hybridity, identity

I’m black
My blood flows evenly, powerfully,
and when they shout Nigger
and you shout ‘Shame’
aint nobody debating my blackness.

...

I’m not mixed up about it.
So take your questions, your interest,

your patronage. Run along.

Just leave me.

(Kay, "So You Think I Am a Mule")

1. Blackness, Origins and Hybrid Identities: "It would be nice and simple if we were all pure"

In Jackie Kay's 1984 poem "So You Think I Am a Mule," the lyric speaker is an unapologetic mixed-race woman. She responds very assertively to the questions of a baffled white Scottish woman who has a hard time believing that her interlocutor identifies herself both as black and Scottish. Refusing to be put down with racially coded language which tries to determine her "true origins," questions the "purity" of her skin and labels her a "mulatto," the female lyric speaker (taken to be Kay's alter ego as the writer was born to a white Scottish mother and a black Nigerian father) proudly and unashamedly aligns herself with blackness and her "black sisters" ("So You Think"). The poem, written in the form of a dialogue, also functions as a strong backlash against Britain, which shows racial bias toward non-white Brits at the end of the twentieth century.

Jackie Kay's lyric "I" embodies a self-confident black woman "not mixed up" about her identity. As we will see in this paper, she is a far cry from most female protagonists in the novels of Andrea Levy, a British-born writer of Jamaican descent, published during the nineties. *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994), *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996), and *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999) make part of what Susan Alice Fischer terms a "trilogy" (199). All three narratives focus on London-born daughters of first-generation Jamaican immigrants who grow up and come of age in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, respectively. The novels are often set in cramped and dilapidated council flats, the interior of which is important to Levy as the journey her heroines undertake always starts from and is closely linked to the family home. However, as Jo Pready suggests, "a sense of home is disrupted by other spaces," mainly by public spaces such as streets, playgrounds, schools, pubs, youth clubs, hairdresser's, hospitals, or unemployment offices, which also feature prominently in Levy's fiction. According to Pready, spaces outside the home are very often "scenes of extreme violence" (18) where our protagonists, as we will see, suffer racial discrimination or even sexual abuse.

A nagging question that second-generation immigrants in Britain face on a daily basis, especially in the public sphere, is “Where do you come from?” This question, which also happens to be the opening line of Kay’s poem, is a recurring theme in these three coming-of-age novels that draw heavily on Levy’s personal experiences of growing up on a council estate in North London. The author claims that, during her childhood, she was asked that question all the time: “[It] was as constant a noise as a ticking clock. But if I answered ‘Jamaica’, lips would curl or tongues would tut” (“This Is My England”). Helena Maria Lima suggests that Levy’s young women continually struggle with the question and heavily resist defining themselves in relation to their parents’ origins: “For how long... will young Black Londoners have to answer to the white = English questions about their origin, identity, and place in that society?” (58)^[1] In her fiction, Levy shows how these girls and young women navigate their lives and attempt to position themselves in terms of private, ethnic, and national identity in contemporary Britain. Just like Jackie Kay’s poem, which brazenly articulates contemporary identity politics (or, in other words, who “deserves” to claim British identity), Levy’s early novels also explore how the concept of what Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe terms ‘compulsory blackness’ (334, 335) informs private and public realities of her protagonists. We will examine whether Levy’s protagonists ever reach a point in their lives where they can (or want to) assert themselves in the manner of Jackie Kay’s “I’m black and I’m proud” statement.

As Stuart Hall claims in his essay “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” growing up in the Caribbean, he “had never ever heard anybody either call themselves, or refer to anybody else as ‘Black.’ Never. I heard a thousand other words. My grandmother could differentiate about fifteen different shades between light brown and dark brown” (53). Levy’s second novel, *Never Far from Nowhere*, opens with a clear reference to the issue Hall has raised here, showing that every discussion of race and skin color is far more nuanced than meets the (English) eye, which only differentiates between ‘black’ and ‘white.’ Using alternating perspectives of two sisters/narrators, the light-skinned Vivien, and the “darker” Olive, *Never Far from Nowhere* highlights the extremely complex net of interrelated histories of Britain and the Caribbean and the difficulties contemporary Britain has been tackling which contain the consequences of its colonial and imperial past. Levy demonstrates how personal and private histories were deeply enmeshed with the workings of the British Empire. As Vivien, one of the sisters, says,

our parents were from Jamaica. ... [My mother's] great-grandmother was a slave, but in her freedom she married a fairer-skinned man. My grandmother married a man who descended from Scottish farmers. My mother had fair skin with strong African features.

My father's mother was part Spanish, part Indian, part African. She married a man of north African descent who lived in a large house in St Andrew... The Caribbean legacy left me with fair skin and black wavy hair. And Olive with a black skin, a head of tight frizzy hair streaked with red, and green eyes. (Never Far 2)

The hybridized heritage the two sisters share with their counterparts in other novels reflects all too complicated issues of race, ethnicity, and skin tone, blurring the boundaries between the designations 'black' and 'white.' It is obvious that their Jamaican legacy is not limited to the black Afro-Caribbean area but extends far beyond to white European countries and to former colonizers such as Spain and Scotland. In *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, for instance, Angela Jacobs, the protagonist and narrator, refers to her brother who was born with red hair: "It's the Scottish in you', my mum would say to him, but she never explained where the Scottish came from" (17). Angela's mother's skin, on the other hand, is so pale that in Jamaica, she passed for white, the reason why "they sometimes wouldn't serve her in shops... or sometimes she'd get privileged treatment for exactly the same reason" (*Every Light* 8). Family trees, including white European ancestors, which in turn resulted in different varieties of complexion and pale(r) children, thus make part and parcel of black Caribbean identities, so baffling for postwar British society. "It would be nice and simple," as Levy herself claims, "if we were all pure. If we all came from where our parents, grandparents, and beyond came from. If we all just took on our forefathers' culture. Wouldn't it be nice if we could say that all Africans are black, and all English are white?" ("This is my England"). 'White privilege' that Angela's mother enjoys in Jamaica does not of course apply to her daily existence in London, where she is simply reduced to the black Other.

The Caribbean area is, according to Stuart Hall, "the juncture point" where "black, brown, white, African, European, American, Spanish, French, East Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, Jew, Dutch" collided. "It is the space where the creolisations and assimilations and syncretisms were negotiated" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 267). An emblematic encounter in *Fruit of the Lemon*

shows the extent to which Britain can be oblivious to its colonial past and the processes that Hall highlights here. Faith Jackson, the protagonist of the novel, spends the weekend in the idyllic English countryside where her friend's parents own a house. In a local pub where they go for a beer, she is the only black person and feels strangely out of place. When a man in the pub learns that Faith's parents are from the Caribbean ("As soon as you walked in I thought I bet she's from Jamaica" (150)), he enthusiastically tells her that he has just returned from a vacation in Jamaica where, funnily enough, he met a black man with whom he shares the same name:

'What do you think of that, Faith?' he asked me. And because he asked me, I said, 'Well, the thing is, that would have been his slave name, you see.' Then before I really knew what I was saying I'd said, 'Your family probably owned his family once.' ... And I giggled a smile at Mr Bunyan. But he still stared at me like I just spat in his face. (Fruit 151-152)

The 'creolizations,' 'assimilations,' and 'syncretisms' as part of the wider imperial/colonial project are those processes that are often viewed as having happened in some faraway and "exotic" places at some distant point in history. Furthermore, they are often perceived as having no connection to personal histories whatsoever. As Chris Weedon suggests, "while aspects of white British national identity still rely on narratives of empire that celebrate Britain's imperial past, 'Empire' is increasingly being subject to selective amnesia and disavowal" (26). In *Fruit of the Lemon*, Faith's unexpectedly direct and cheeky response might have left Mr. Bunyan dumbfounded. Still, it serves as a reminder of how imperial Britain's interference profoundly impacted the lives of Caribbean people, which consequently altered the fabric of life in the United Kingdom, too. In the words of Graham MacPhee, however, the dominant perspectives that have emerged from and been shaped by the "violent and exploitative imperial history" conceive this history as utterly disconnected from the present, which has consequently turned "imperially innocent" (2).

In a similar vein, Stuart Hall adds that "[t]he indigenous British racism of the postwar period" is marked by "profound historical forgetfulness – the loss of historical memory, the collective amnesia, the ideological repression – which has overtaken the British people since the 'end of Empire'^[2] in the 1950s" ("Race and 'Moral Panics'" 58). "Imperially innocent" postwar Britain seems

not at all concerned with the realities of its colonial subjects, neither with those living in former colonies nor those who come to Britain to settle down. Black immigrants were perceived primarily as a problem that needed to be controlled and policed.^[3] It is no wonder that the issue of skin tone and ascribed identity, which profoundly affect the lives of our protagonists, features strongly in all of Levy's novels. Hybrid identities as an inevitable outcome of what Mahtani and Moreno term 'white/black crossings' (qtd. in Ifekwunigwe 322) challenge the seemingly stable concepts of 'blackness' and 'whiteness,' especially when these identities tend to become a legitimate part of the future multiethnic fabric of the 'Mother Country.'^[4]

2. Liminality in Levy's Novels: "You're not black and you're not white"

It comes as no surprise that due not only to their transnational ancestry and racism but also to internalized colorism, the mothers in Levy's novels, first-generation immigrants, demonstrate "the inability of reductive racial categories" to define their children (Perfect 58). Assuming that their daughters should be loosely positioned somewhere between 'white' and 'black,' they refuse to define them as 'black' but at the same time flinch from clear identification: "You're not black and you're not white. That's what we are – we're not black and we're not white" (Every Light 70); "[M]y mother thought we weren't black. Or should I say, she tried to believe that she was not black" (Never Far 11). Levy's mothers thus seem to inadvertently confuse their British-born daughters and confine them to a sort of liminal space in which the girls are "discouraged from thinking about identities as complex or as hybridised" (Perfect 58). Moreover, the Britain in which these girls come of age is reluctant to allow them to construct and develop hybrid identities but stubbornly insists on boxing them into one specific category. Levy's girls and women are more often than not caught between cultures and constantly compelled to negotiate private (black Jamaican) and public (white British) spheres of existence.

Identities, as Stuart Hall claims, are never completed, never finished. Identity is always, as he says, in the process of formation. When it comes to Britain and non-white immigrants, so many people "were blocked out and refused an identity and identification within majority nation, having to

find some ground, some place, some position on which to stand. Blocked out of any access to an English or British identity, people had to try to discover who they were” (“Old and New Identities” 52). According to Bernardine Evaristo, a black British author who was, like Andrea Levy, growing up in London during the fifties and sixties, “the concept of ‘black British’ was considered a contradiction in terms,” as “Brits didn’t recognize people of colour as fellow citizens” (5). She also claims that “there was nothing in the British society of my suburban childhood that endorsed the concept of blackness as something positive, other than the music coming from America. ... It was otherwise synonymous with being bad, evil, ugly, inferior, criminal, stupid and dangerous” (18). The portrayals of childhood in Levy’s novels echo the one given by Evaristo in which second-generation immigrant children are indeed often refused access to English identity. Angela in *Every Light in the House Burnin’* grows up on a North London estate where there are no other black families and is often interpellated as “dirty” (176), “darkie,” “Blackie,” “golliwog” or “nig-nog” (68) at school, Sunday school, or in the playground. However, when she goes to a hairdresser’s shop owned by a black Caribbean woman, she finds herself surrounded by other black women and feels “pale in this company, out of place, as white here as I felt black among the pasty-faced English” (202). At another point in the novel, her music teacher tells her that she looks Italian and asks her whether she is, in fact, Italian (*Every Light* 230). It seems that Levy’s protagonists try to discover who they are, to determine their identity, and relate to being ‘black’ (or ‘white’) according to highly mixed signals they get from society, too.

Nowhere are these mixed signals more prominent than in *Never Far from Nowhere*. Giving voice to two very different sisters who start “from the same place” and have “the same chances,” the novel demonstrates to what extent racism, skin tone, and internalized colorism inform the realities of these girls. The concise description that Vivien, the fair-skinned one, gives at the beginning of the novel functions as a suitable background against which Levy constructs their intertwined and largely opposed stories: “In a dim light I could be taken for Italian or Spanish. Olive was darker. Black. The Caribbean legacy” (2). What Ifekwunigwe terms “visual approximation to the ‘white’ English norm” (329) allows Vivien to pass for (and therefore at every opportunity represent herself as) white. We also see her throughout the novel as an aspiring and ambitious young woman,

whereas Olive is a troublesome girl who seems doomed from the start, especially after being sexually abused by a man she meets in a bar and after getting pregnant at seventeen.

Michael Perfect suggests that Vivien and Olive “performatively assume an identity which they think will empower them” (58). It is significant that in contrast to her light-skinned sister and the protagonists in Levy’s other novels, Olive is the only one who wholeheartedly embraces blackness and, as Ifekwunigwe argues, “legitimizes ‘black’ as a powerful and positive political affiliation” (334) over the course of the novel. It can be argued that for her black is not (only) “a question of pigmentation,” as Hall claims, but “a historical category, a political category, a cultural category” (“Old and New Identities” 53). Olive is much more in tune with these categories of blackness than her counterparts and her confidence echoes that of Jackie Kay’s lyric speaker: “I liked being black. I wanted to be black. Being black was not a bad thing, being black was something to be proud of.” Her little daughter, whose father is a white man, is pale in complexion, but Olive keeps telling her that “she’s black. It’s a political statement, not just a fact” (Never Far 11-12). However, whenever Olive openly claims these categories of blackness, she hits the wall, as it were. If Jackie Kay’s woman is embodied in “a mule” and seen as someone who does not fit into the category of being “pure” (as opposed to the “purity” of white British people) (“So You Think”), Olive, too, is sadly pigeonholed as a racial stereotype. She is usually perceived as a “wog” and “coon” at numerous points in the novel (in the street, in a pub, or in the unemployment office). She is also often reduced to “a stupid hysterical black cow” (169) by her husband, who leaves her for another woman hardly a year into their hasty marriage, or a “lippy nigger bitch” (341) by white policemen in the street.

We witness Olive’s gradual downfall in the novel as she ends up an unemployed, miserable single mother struggling to find her place in British society. Her desperate attempts at becoming a good wife and mother, gaining agency (as she starts driving on her own), and ultimately managing the identity of a strong black woman are constantly thwarted. Unashamedly representing herself as black and British, Olive seems to be constantly punished for being so confident and open about it. As Hall claims, black immigrants in the metropolitan center were “placed in their otherness, in their marginality, by the nature of the ‘English eye,’ the all-encompassing ‘English eye’” (“The Local and the Global” 20). Although Olive is not an immigrant but a British-born woman who has spent her

whole life in London, she seems to be firmly placed in her marginality. Deeply disappointed (not unlike Faith in *Fruit of the Lemon*, as we will see) with how Britain blocks her out and humiliates her every step of the way (“[M]y England shakes underneath me with every step I take” [361]) she eventually decides to move to Jamaica with her daughter. The (un)surprising decision is informed by the naïve belief that she will immediately fit in there, but it is uncertain whether her black skin alone will grant her access to Jamaican identity and society. However, just like Jackie Kay’s speaker who turns to her “black sisters, / to women who nourish each other” (“So You Think”), there is at least a tentative hope that Olive might find her place in the world and a more fulfilling identity in her parents’ country of origin.

Vivien’s mantra “I didn’t want to end up like Olive” (133, 257, 286), on the other hand, echoes mercilessly throughout *Never Far from Nowhere*. It can be argued that Olive’s and Vivien’s alternating stories contrast each other, striking us as almost two sides of the same coin. Vivien is so driven by the consequences of her sister’s misbehavior and failures in life that she wants to detach herself not only from her family and her black Jamaican heritage but also from her humble working-class background as much as possible. The issues of both race and class are heavily intertwined in this novel, and Vivien ironically refers to herself as “the callous gold-digging woman” (*Never Far* 313). As opposed to her sister Olive, confined to shabby council flats and regular visits to drab unemployment offices, the light-skinned Vivien does not want nor need to settle for the typical life of a black woman/mother/wife/housewife. According to Bernardine Evaristo, “the reality is that a lighter-skinned middle-class woman will be treated very differently in Britain from a darker-skinned working-class woman” (29). She is well aware that if she worked hard enough and kept representing herself as white, she should be able to climb the social ladder more easily. Vivien thus continually conforms to the ‘white’ expectations. In college in Canterbury, for instance, where she is surrounded mostly by white middle-class students, Vivien cleverly hides her black working-class origins. She lies about coming from Islington, a much more posh and wealthier part of London than the Finsbury Park council estate where her family lives. Again, to use Evaristo’s words, “if you are light enough to be racialized as white, it’s an option, and sadly some people disassociate themselves from their backgrounds in order to maintain a new white identity” (27).

Vivien realizes early on that due to her pale complexion, her identity is not as fixed as her sister's. When Eddie, who will later become her boyfriend, asks where she is from, she is ashamed of her black roots ("I wanted to be from somewhere he would be interested in, not just prejudiced against") and makes up a lie about her parents coming from Mauritius (Never Far 182). As Levy herself states, "I was embarrassed that my parents were not English. One of the reasons was that no one around me was interested in the country my parents came from. To them, it was just a place full of inferior black people" ("This is my England"). Vivien thus resorts to lying and constructing identities throughout much of the novel simply because she is aware that white English people tend to perceive her (almost) as one of them. As Perfect says, Vivien tends to "avoid talking or even thinking about race at all in the hope of fitting in with her white friends" (57). We constantly see her tacitly and cowardly approve of the racist discourse of some of her friends so as not to be rejected by them: "I stood round with them. ... I smiled, looked horrified or puzzled, whatever was required. ... I did everything like everyone else. Except that I didn't speak. ... I wanted to stay unseen" (Never Far 40). In this novel, we see public spaces, especially streets, clubs, and pubs, where racism and violence are continually perpetuated, but these are also the spaces that allow Vivien to assume the most suitable identity. Most of the time, when hanging out with her white friends, she tries hard not to stand out and do "whatever is required" even if it means denying ties with her own family. When she comes across Olive and her white husband in the street, she pretends not to know them as one of the friends comments on "that wog with that white bloke" (Never Far 108).

3. Silences as Part of Jamaican Heritage in Britain

It comes as no surprise that, while struggling to figure out a way of belonging and (re)create an identity that will be good enough for British society, Vivien in *Never Far from Nowhere* and Levy's protagonists in other novels are ashamed and most of the time "keep quiet" about their racial and ethnic origins. Apart from being subject to racist slurs and various forms of discrimination, these girls come of age not knowing much or anything at all about their parents' past and country of origin. The absence of oral tradition in Jamaican families permeates these novels as the protagonists' parents are hesitant to talk about their history: "My father seemed only to exist in one

plane of time – the present” (Every Light 3); “My mum and dad never talked about their lives before” (Fruit 2). As Laursen suggests, these silences stem from “the parents’ desire for self-invention in Britain” but also from the fact that the history of Jamaican people “is too traumatic to be told” (59). On the other hand, according to Perfect, “their reluctance to say anything about their lives in Jamaica is largely the consequence of their being made to feel outsiders in Britain and, in turn, developing anxieties about the legitimacy of their residence there” (56). So, instead of sharing various aspects of their rich cultural background, they seem to endow their children with fears, anxieties, a sense of inferiority, and, above all, a great deal of confusion about their roots, as we have already seen.

Jamaican migration to Britain in the post-war years, as Laursen claims, produced a historical rift between the collective, shared memory of slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean and the experience of racism in contemporary Britain (58). This rift and ignorance about their parents’ Jamaican past and family legacy is part and parcel of second-generation children’s lives. Towards the end of *Never Far from Nowhere*, Olive is determined to move to her parents’ country where life for a strong black woman like her should be easier. However, there is something uncomfortable about her decision since she is not familiar with the Jamaican way of life. It is interesting, on the other hand, that people in the Caribbean “studied their Shakespeare and Wordsworth at school” and had “a broad understanding of the ways of the British” (Phillips 112). As Faith’s aunt in *Fruit of the Lemon* says, “they learned the Kings and Queens of England, reciting the wives of Henry the Eight ... in English they learnt the past tense” (331). Imperialist project, which, of course, imposed British education onto its black subjects, made them, among other things, “uncomfortably and surprisingly British” (Phillips 12). Their kids, who rightfully claim British identity, are, in turn, entirely disconnected from their parents’ origins and their cultural legacy.

It is only in *Fruit of the Lemon* that Levy confronts this discontinuity head-on. In the second part of the novel, set entirely in Jamaica, the protagonist finally goes beyond the unspoken, beyond absences and silences that have permeated her life and so obviously formed her identity. However, she has to suffer a psychic collapse before she is able to face them. Moving out of her family home and sharing a house with three white friends, Faith hopes that she can easily blend in. The domestic space of the shared household seems safe and harmonious at first, but the

atmosphere soon turns out to be “strained” and “charged” (Fruit 158) due to sexual tensions between the roommates. When Simon, a man whom Faith is attracted to, ends up in a relationship with her white English friend, it seems that Faith no longer fits into that ‘white’ home. Already disappointed with numerous other aspects of her life where she encounters racial bias (not getting a promotion as a dresser at the BBC or witnessing a racist attack on a black bookstore being only some of them), she thinks that once again her skin color has “failed” her and proved a major obstacle to being given a proper chance in life: “I didn’t want to be black anymore. ... What it all comes down to in the end is black against white. It was simple” (Fruit 187). A nervous breakdown she suffers can be read as the culmination of years of silencing, denial, and marginalization that women in all of Levy’s novels struggle with.

Faith’s emotional healing seems possible only through gaining immediate access to her parents’ country of origin and Jamaican identity. Her search for roots might ultimately lead to, what Stuart Halls calls, “the recovery of lost histories.” According to Hall, these histories “have never been told about ourselves that we could not learn in schools, that were not in any books, and that we had to recover” (“Old and New Identities” 52). The novel thus makes up for the utter lack of oral tradition in Jamaican families living in Britain, as Levy presents us with untold and unrecorded stories narrated by Faith’s relatives who are, unlike her parents, more than willing to tell them: “Coral’s Story told to me by Coral,” “Eunice’s Story told to me by Coral,” “Wade’s Story told to me by Violet,” “Cecelia’s Story told to me by Vincent.” By becoming an active listener, Faith translates these testimonies into a narrative that legitimizes and acknowledges, as Laursen says, “the hybrid and transnational nature of Jamaican identity. The telling and retelling of these family stories ... highlight differences within a seemingly coherent black experience in Jamaica” (63). For Faith, this is the beginning of a process of finally coming to terms with the nagging sense of embarrassment and with the identity that is only in the eyes of the English coherent and fixed (black Jamaican). She realizes that she is indeed far from being strictly defined and that she could reconcile her highly mixed-race roots with the British identity she claims every right to.

As Maria Helena Lima suggests, “the knowledge Faith brings back to London empowers her to share” the history of both her family and Jamaica, and “the voice readers hear at the end of Levy’s novel cannot ever be silenced again but promises some kind of reserved retribution” (74). Not

unlike Jackie Kay's lyric speaker, straightforward, unapologetic, and fierce when invoked as 'Nigger,' Faith has finally gathered the strength to face and reply to racial slurs she has been subject to since childhood: "Let them tell me, 'You're a darkie. Faith's a darkie.' I am the granddaughter of Grace and William Campbell. ... I am descended from Katherine whose mother was a slave. ... Let them say what they like. Because I am the bastard child of the Empire and I will have my day" (Fruit 385).

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, young women in Levy's fiction constantly find themselves in liminal states where their identity resists the stubborn imposition of the dominant 'black'/'white' dichotomy. They rarely fit into neat racial or ethnic categories where British society wants to box them. Contemporary Britain in Levy's novels does not know how to deal with former colonial subjects, especially with their offspring, who perceive the country as the only home they have. To go back to Stuart Hall one last time, "the diaspora experience," the background against which Levy portrays the lives of her protagonists, is "defined by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite difference; by hybridity." Identities that stem from the diasporic experience are "those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" ("Cultural Identity" 269). If we read Levy's novels and her young female characters in this light, it is clear that she offers us a new, redefined concept of Britishness that needs to be acknowledged. Due to the extremely hybrid nature of these identities, both those categorized as 'black' and the 'pass-for-white' women struggle to find their place, role, and voice in the world of Levy's fiction. These narratives, however, articulate their concerns loud and clear, making them a legitimate and important part of the contemporary British experience.

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[1] Probably the most famous answer to this worn-out question in contemporary British fiction is given in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. When Joyce Chalfen, a white English upper-middle-class woman, suggests how "very exotic" Millat and Irie, London-born kids of immigrant parents, look, and insists on knowing where they originally come from, the answer she gets is not the one she anticipates (nor the one she wants to hear). "Willesden," a north London area where the children live, does not usually satisfy the white English. Millat, however, refuses to tell Joyce the "exotic" name of his parents' country of origin. He keeps mocking her by being even more "geographically precise" and points to the part of London where he was born and spent his early years:

"Whitechapel ... Via the Royal London Hospital and the 207 bus" (Smith 319).

[2] In a 2015 interview, Levy explained what the term 'British Empire' and its legacy meant to her: "It's both an actual reality – a history, what happened to this country, and how this country became what it is – and it's also a mindset. It's also what's left. It's how this country still sees itself. Why we're still a country that believes we should 'punch above our weight.' Why we aren't just looking at ourselves as this little island, but still thinking of ourselves as this colossus who once strode the earth. To be from a country that had this sense of itself as a colossus and then to lose that sense, informs the national psyche. ... So for somebody like me, it's a source of confrontation and conflict" (Rowell 279).

[3] As Catherine Paul suggests, rather than seeking to persuade public opinion of the benefits of inward colonial migration or the responsibilities that Britain had to the millions of colonial soldiers and airmen who had fought in World War II, colonial migration was immediately constructed as a problem that needed to be contained and mitigated (qtd. in MacPhee 42).

[4] In Levy's novel *Small Island* (2004), set mostly in London in 1948, the year when the first large group of immigrants from the Caribbean docked in Britain, 'the Mother Country' is constantly invoked. The protagonists, a Jamaican immigrant couple, naively look up to England as a promised land or the metaphorical caring mother ready to embrace her colonial subjects as her children. It can be argued that *Small Island* largely functions as a prequel to the novels discussed in this paper. In the course of the novel, however, the Mother Country very soon turns into "the filthy," "ragged, old and dusty tramp" and a "stinking cantankerous hag" (*Small Island* 139). As Maria

Helena Lima claims, “England in the forties is indeed a (white) mother who does not know how to treat her offspring and rejects them” (79). For discussions of the concept of Britain as the Mother Country in *Small Island*, see Ukić Košta.



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