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Abstract

Defending the Heritage of the Language is a coded resistance to an English that is being reinvented by its multiple users, and is a sign of disquiet at the challenge which a polyglot and cosmopolitan migrant population presents to the holistic notion of 'the nation' constructed and fortified by a political and intellectual rearguard. Hence the quest of David Dabydeen's Guyanese narrator to redefine his identity through producing prose in Standard English can be read as beseeching entry to a community imagined as being culturally and linguistically homogeneous. His is the standard dream of a bygone colonial elite where to write the oppressor's language with proper attention to grammatical and syntactic rules is to be liberated from a colonized condition:

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I suddenly long to be white, to be calm, to write with grace and clarity, to make words which have status, to shape them into the craftsmanship of English china, coaches, period furniture, harpsichords, wigs, English anything, for whatever they put their hands and minds to worked wonderfully. Everything they produced was fine and lasted forever. We are mud, they the chiselled stone of Oxford that has survived centuries and will always be here.¹

To the extent that Dabydeen's *roman à clef* is constrained by the narrator's performance of this aspiration, it resembles the normative apprenticeship novel, the tracing of an irregular route from colonial through immigrant deprivations to a place at Oxford, retaining resonances of already-read scenarios set in different climes and other times. That it turns out to be more than the enactment of his ambition is due to the narrator inadvertently fracturing the structure which his story seeks to set in place and on which it depends. For every prediction written into his chronicle of a journey towards assimilation is interrupted by the very utterances he would denigrate and deny, every move towards the projected goals diverted by voices recalling him from the urge to historical and cultural amnesia.

Many stories are now being told about the post-colonial diaspora in Britain; these are diverse in medium and modes of narration, and differentiated by the geographical origins, the cultural, class and occupational positions, the gender and sexual identities of the tellers. Dabydeen's is told by a narrator who is a young heterosexual male, an Indian Guyanese descended from Hindu low-caste indentured labourers, and a parentless

school-boy immigrant in Britain. His is offered as a story of disorientation, dispossession and lack. About his forebears' homeland he is ignorant: 'I had no knowledge whatsoever of India, no inkling of which part my ancestors came from, nor when they left, nor even their names' (p. 10); of Hindu tradition and ritual he knows little, his great-great-grandfather having converted to Christianity, which similarly plays no part in the family's life. His only connection to this discontinuous history and broken past is through his grandmother, who around her ankle wears a thick silver bracelet bequeathed by her mother and 'which had come all the way from India' (p. 36), and who is the bearer of legend and rumour about the family's fortunes and misfortunes in Guyana.

What he does know is that they are Indians; despite which neither his mother's fears of African-Caribbeans, exacerbated during the race riots on the eve of independence, nor the received wisdom about their propensity to violence and their ignorance, get in the way of his learning that the communities are united by a history of enforced migration, share a colonial condition and speak the same language. More than once he returns to his last meeting with Auntie Clarice – 'truly she was old, her African face sprouting hairs between the cracks, like a golden apple-seed' (p. 39) – who gives him a carefully-saved five-dollar bill and whose parting words 'You is we, remember you is we' (p. 40) later reverberate to arrest an impulse to separate himself from 'noisy West Indian-ness'.

Deprivation, backwardness, incomprehension, incapacity are recurrent terms in his judgement of urban New Amsterdam and rural Albion Village, and are repeated in his perception of the post-colonial migrants in the rundown suburbs of England, his desire to make something of himself demanding an impossible forgetfulness: 'All I want is to escape from this dirt and shame called Balham, this coon condition, this ignorance that prevents me from knowing anything, not even who we are, who they are.' (p. 230). Instead his story is an act of remembrance without sentimentality about want, squalid living conditions, and drunkenness in Guyana, but not without piety for the culture of survival nurtured and sustained by its communities, and even as he withholds value from Creole as the speech of adversity and illiteracy, the vivid and versatile utterances of its speakers are a rebuke to his denials.

His narration of the black migration in Britain, while not without compassion, anger and wit, is marked by a determined detachment. Where the representation of this diaspora has tended to focus on cultural imbrication – whether effected in a glamorized underworld, amongst sophisticated metropolitans, on the meeting ground of sexual identities and political affiliations, and so on – Dabydeen's social space is situated on the margins. Where other constructions have foregrounded refusal, assertion and affirmation in the redefinition of the migrant experience, Dabydeen's players are timid and resigned, desirous of invisibility. Of his friend's mother he observes that only on entering 'the protected environment of

her house, the doors and curtains closed to alien eyes', its rooms decorated in green, smelling sweetly of spices, its walls displaying pictures of worshippers in Mecca does 'her sari reveal[ed] a grace and dignity' (p. 25). The status of outsiders which he assigns the community is registered by their insufficiency in English, the shopkeeper's anxiety about the wording stamped on his passport, 'permitted to remain in the United Kingdom for an indefinite period', a sign of the inability to escape from the immigrant condition: 'He would grow dismal, muttering about how English was so hard, how every word had a dozen different understandings, how he could barely pronounce the words, never mind glean their multiple meanings.' (p. 124)

His is the world of landlords to destitute tenants, open-all-hours corner grocers, owners of video shops, unskilled labour:

In the swift journey between Tooting Bec and Balham, we re-lived the passage from India to Britain, or India to the Caribbean to Britain, the long journeys of a previous century across unknown seas towards the shame of plantation labour ... families scattered across the west, settling in one country or another depending on the availability of visas; we lived from hand to mouth, hustling or thieving or working nightshifts and sleeping daytime; we were ashamed of our past, frightened by the present and not daring to think of the future. (p. 17 and p. 168)

If Dabydeen's migrants necessarily inhabit two worlds and are contributors to the formation of Britain's contemporary protean cultures, their limited access to English confines them to the periphery. When their more aggressive children claim citizenship by becoming amateur pimps, small-time drug-dealers and inexpert purveyors of pornography, their facility in the foreign tongue is limited to its most debased forms, whether the inert jargon of Business Plans or the brutalized vocabulary of sex magazines, thus again condemning them to the margins.

In the narrator's book then proper English is real power, and he intends to acquire both. The title is borrowed from a canonical work which the underprivileged and ambitious schoolboy is studying for his 'A' Levels, Kurtz's formal designation of his betrothed being used in several of its alternative meanings, as aspiration and as transfiguration. This last is registered in the narrator's recollections of the mosques and temples of Guyana treasured by their users, 'their white-washed domes and elegant turrets ... exhibitions of the beauty and idealism of their barefoot lives' (p. 19). The former is performed by the boy in the care of the Social Services who gets to read English at Oxford.

But although it is he who realizes his ambition by formally moving to the official centre – 'I am no longer an immigrant here, for I can decipher the texts' (p. 195) – while the illiterate Joseph Countryman destroys himself, it is the visionary Rastafarian who is the fiction's figure of a utopian

desire. Lacking a command of Standard English but with a capacity to use words appropriate to his exorbitant intentions, Joseph undermines the certainties which the narrator naively avows, his untrained intelligence and untutored imagination a reproach to his friend's eager participation in rites of the educational apparatus. Where the narrator accepts language as a pliant medium to be crafted by skilled users, and elevates writing over all other texts, Joseph knows that 'Words are so full of cleverness ... Every word is cat with nine separate lives' (p. 103), understands that a video camera is 'a different kind of book' (p. 105), and, obsessed with the word 'cocoon' while in a state of advanced disorientation, struggles to enunciate an inchoate version of how language is a system of meaning constituted by signs that are arbitrary and differential, dependent on conventions and relations:

They were the very first chaotic attempts he had made in his life to write something, apart from his name ... It's me, all of that is me ... here is C and this one here is O and another C and two more O's, and then N.... Look! C is half O... it nearly there, but when it form O it breaking up again, never completing.... A is for apple, B for bat, C is for cocoon, which is also coon, N is for nut, but it's really for nuts, N is for nothing, N is for nignog. Can't you see, all of it is me. (pp. 194-5)

While the narrator accedes to the requirements of the English Literature syllabus, quickly learning to apply the method of 'theme and imagery', 'appearance and reality' to any piece of writing he studies, Joseph protests at rules putting an iron-bar in a room where the bird of poetry is trapped, and refuses his friend's facile explanation that Conrad's blacks dying under the trees relate to the notion of suffering and redemption at the core of the novel's concerns:

No, it ain't, is about colours. You been saying is a novel 'bout the fall of man, but is really 'bout a dream.... The white light of England and the Thames is the white sun over the Congo that can't mix with the green of the bush and the black skin of the people. All the colours struggling to curve against each other like rainbow, but instead the white light want to blot out the black and the green and reduce the world to one blinding colour ... The white man want clear everything away, clear away the green bush and the blacks and turn the whole place into ivory which you can't plant or smoke or eat. Ivory is the heart of the white man. (pp. 98-9)

In contrast to the narrator's search for recognition by the master culture through assimilation, Joseph withdraws from its gaze, absenting himself from the identity it would impose on him:

When I was in borstal I was rumour. They look at me and see ape, trouble, fist. And all the time I nothing, I sleep and wake and eat like zombie ... and no ideas in my mind, no ideas about where I come from and where I should be going. You can't even see yourself, even if you stand in front of mirror, all you seeing is shape. But all the time they seeing you as animal, riot, nigger, but you know you is nothing, atoms, only image and legend in their minds. (p. 101).

To fashion a self Joseph positions himself as a Rastafarian and looks to Africa, urging the narrator to find a book 'which told the whole story' different from the one which said 'that we don't have any chemistry and sums ... That we walk about naked with other people's bones through our noses ... That we eat each other' (p. 108), and aspiring to register this identity through making a film of *Heart of Darkness* on his stolen video camera.

Thus the identity of Joseph, the graduate of Borstals and Boys' Homes and the speaker of a deviant English, is multi-located, dispersed, creolized, whereas the narrator, who has proved his proficiency as a writer of the stepmother tongue, seeks a refashioning that requires him to deny his native beginnings and migrant experience. At Oxford, long after Joseph's suicide, the narrator is haunted by him 'breaking in to the most burglar-proof of institutions, reminding me of my dark shadow, drawing me back to my dark self' (pp. 195-6), but determined to remake himself as a figure who can be accommodated in the master narrative - 'I will grow strong in this library, this cocoon ... I will emerge from it and be somebody, some recognisable shape, not a lump of aborted, anonymous flesh' (p. 198).

If the narrator is sometimes earnestly and sometimes acerbically up-front about his susceptibility to the seductions of *The English Heritage*, and is neither apologetic nor censorious about his shame at being kith and kin to rumbustious West Indians or Asians 'wrapped in alien, colourful clothes who whispered to each other in a strange tongue' (p. 15), the incongruity of his intentions are abundantly inscribed. Other ironies emerge contingently, for the paradox of this fiction is that in a text which is preoccupied with language, in which language is cultural artefact and social lever, no shift in linguistic usage is effected. 'Black people have to have their own words' (p. 147). This retort to the narrator's attempt at a classically-styled epitaph for the obscure sister of his humble Pakistani landlord comes from Shaz, inept student and soon-to-be devourer of pornography, client of prostitutes and pimp, which considerably diminishes its authority. Yet it is Shaz's observation which haunts the book as reprimand and reminder that Europhone colonial and post-colonial writing, in bringing the experience of colonialism and post-coloniality into representation, appropriated and overturned tropes and literary traditions, and invented new hybridized languages as a means of interrogating and subverting the master culture.

Here, however, a narrator determined to establish his own linguistic competence consigns Broken English, both the fluent repertoire of Creole and the eccentric improvisations of recent migrants, to direct reported speech, while keeping his own enunciations free of their transgressions. (A very different strategy is deployed by Dabydeen in his poetry.) The consequence of this separation is a fiction which, despite its deliberate

juxtaposition of temporalities and its crossing of genre boundaries in mixing social and marvellous realism, personal testimony with detached commentary, does not rupture received fictional form. Can we attribute this to a complicity between text and narrator? Is this narrator the product or the producer of the text? That ambiguous area where the critical is embroiled with the confessional is discernible in the representation of sexuality. The charge of pornography made against the fiction in the *New Statesman and Society* is patently absurd, the stories of adolescent masturbation and failed fumbblings so innocent as to be disjunct from the depiction of erotic behaviour intended to cause sexual excitement. What is however disturbing is that the language of a consummated encounter is without the affection that is brought to the remembrance of a childhood in Guyana, where the women are not victims but survivors and actors. Thus although the narrator recognizes it from the clichés of sex magazines and is repelled by Shaz's disgusted lusting after the female body, he writes of Monica, the apprentice prostitute managed by Shaz, as a commodity that changes hands: 'Shaz's parting gift ... She let me take her' (p. 217).

Dabydeen has told one of many possible stories about post-colonial migrancy, one in which the narrator, having at the outset made up his mind about his goal, is left on the threshold of adulthood in many minds. Yet I must argue that because the distance between the discourse of text and narrator always shifts and sometimes closes, the critique is enfolded with confession, and confession bears within it the seeds of exculpation. Hence the narrator is not only the object of censure – and a recognizable representative of one route pursued by post-colonial writers whose intentions are interrogated by the fiction – but survives as the voice of an aspiration whose legitimacy has not in the space of the novel been displaced.

NOTES

1. David Dabydeen, *The Intended* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991), pp. 197-98. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.