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THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN DIRAN ADEBAYO'S "SOME KIND OF BLACK"

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Abstract: *"Some Kind of Black" is Adebayo's first published novel, a multi-award winning work widely acclaimed by critics, a book which established its author as one of the most original literary talents on the London scene. The book is a nineties' coming of age story which traces a difficult year in the life of the protagonist. Like most novels written by authors who come from countries of the formerly colonized space the book can be read and interpreted in two ways. This paper looks at the universal character of the story and tries to emphasize the way in which the protagonist's identity is constructed as he unwarily embarks on a journey of self-discovery.*

Keywords: *identity, race, class, self, universal.*

1. Introduction

"Some Kind of Black" is Adebayo's first published novel, a multi-award winning work widely acclaimed by critics, a book which established its author as one of the most original literary talents on the London scene. The book is a nineties' coming of age story which traces a difficult year in the life of the protagonist. It is divided into eleven chapters each bearing a telling title. In a statement posted on his personal website Adebayo admits to the fact that the book is autobiographical to a certain degree even if this only happens at an emotional rather than at a factual level.

The hero's struggle to find his own self mirrors to some extent the author's own search of his true nature as a young man, the problems he had to face and the pressure he was subject to. Thus, he explains on his personal website under the heading *"On Writing"*:

"Having had a most atypical UK black experience (lived in poor, inner city but got scholarship to posh private school and then Oxford University), I certainly felt an internal need to reconnect with the mass of black Britons when I left college, which I felt involved getting deep into street culture – the great majority of black Britons have had working class upbringings, someway different from the States. No doubt some of this street stuff I found is there…"

In point of style the book is a realistic narrative remarkable for the author's use of language and uncanny eye for street talk – West Indian Patois and English slang. He himself makes this point again on his personal website under the same heading *"On Writing"*:

"I don't think you could read a page of my stuff and mistake it for anybody else's. Also I feel I have a real set of environmental influences, from the street

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to the heights of British society to international ones that I bring to bear on the page. Each of my novels tries something from a technical point of view…"

An accurate analysis of the novel is capable of accounting for the fact that it can be read and interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, there is Adebayo's attempt to pinpoint the specific cultural differences which set his hero apart from other London youths. Despite the fact that a lot of progress has been made at various levels, the British post-colonial society is still split by internal dissentions with respect to race, ethnicity, culture and class. On the other hand, the novel could be read as a young man's journey of self-discovery, one which may have an overall universal character mirroring the eternal human search for constructing a genuine identity within a world fraught with contradictions.

Within this paper I would like to concern myself with the universalities of the novel and emphasize the way in which the protagonist's identity is constructed as he unwarily embarks on a journey of self-discovery.

2. Theorizing Identity in Both a British and an African Manner

In an interview with Kuan-Hsing Chen, Stuart Hall explains:

"…the way in which I'm trying to think questions of identity is slightly different from a postmodernist nomadic. I think cultural identity is not fixed, it's always hybrid. But this is precisely because it comes out of very specific historical formations, out of very specific histories and cultural repertoires of enunciation, that it can constitute a 'positionality', which we call, provisionally, identity. It's not just anything. So each of those identity stories is inscribed in the positions we take up and identify with, and have to live this ensemble of identity-positions in all its specificities." [1]

Similarly, *"Some Kind of Black"* is not intent on imposing an authentic clear-cut identity of the hero as a member of the black British community but, more likely, on demonstrating that a person's cultural identity is made up of several ingredients, heterogeneous bits which come together to make up a new whole. Dele glides between three distinct spaces: he is a student at Oxford, he is the son of immigrants of Nigerian descent and he is part of urban London. The elite world, the immigrants' world and the street world – they all have a part to play in the formation of his *'self'*. These various *'selves'* are not isolated; on the contrary they permanently communicate with each other, sometimes are in opposition, sometimes they overlap. On his personal web page Adebayo reveals his intentions:

"Identity is certainly a major theme of my first novel. "Some Kind of Black" examines one troublesome summer in the life of its protagonist Dele, who has his feet in many homes, in the sense of being of Nigerian background, but born in this new country, where he is a minority within a minority, but also a Londoner, a top college boy, coming of age at a time when Afrocentrism /Nubianism and black essentialism is in the ascendancy etc, and he is trying to reach a comfort zone, and a true, viable sense of self amongst all this different information/material he's subject to, at a time when these homes seem to be clashing and asking him to choose between them. The book looks at how a person's identity is produced among this ongoing

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dynamic between roots and routes, and how, in common with the line of other post-moderns, identity is a much less fixed quality than has often been portrayed. "Some Kind of Black" is very much a counterblast against the essentialists among us who would say that there is only one "authentic" way of being and living black. It's pro-heterogeneity."[2]

The authoritarian father and rigid family background have to be reconciled with a typically British education which stresses the importance of individual wishes and preferences.

The bohemian Oxford world, where Dele discovers that being black makes him interesting for his peers and, consequently, enables him to exploit his ethnicity and take advantage of it, is counterbalanced by urban London where the exact same attributes turn him into a victim of racist police officers. However, Dele makes it clear from the beginning of the novel that his main interest is in the future. His origins and family background may have their importance but the future is what he is most interested in. In the first chapter he takes his sister to a pub and clarifies things for her:

"Did you hear anyone mention roots? I just said 'back to purity', that's all. I swear, if I had a puff for every time black folk drone on about 'roots this' and 'roots that'. I'm more worried about my branches, you know. It's the branches that bear fruit and tilt for the sky." (Adebayo, *"Some Kind of Black"* 9)

The African in him will always stay there and his Nigerian roots are never going to be denied, yet he was born in the United Kingdom, he lives and will continue to exist in this western world; therefore, he needs to adapt himself to its characteristics and try to forge an identity that will incorporate both past and present with an emphasis on the future.

As put forward by Adebayo, cultural identity does not lie in the past to be found but rather it is located in the future to be constructed.

There are a multitude of cultural resources which enable people to produce or reproduce identities among which one can mention historical experiences, cultural traditions but also marginalized experiences, fears and anxieties. Certainly, shallow patriotism is not helpful in all these as knowledge of one's roots implies a little bit more than being aware of your country of origin.

"…there was plenty of bogus brothery going down, and the fact that some proud Nubian couple named their kids Kwame and Nefertiti still didn't mean they could find Ethiopia on a map." (Adebayo, *"Some Kind of Black"*54)

3. A Love Affair Beyond Race Boundaries

A crucial experience in the novel which contributes to Dele's finding his real identity is represented by his relationship with Andria, the white girl whom he meets by chance on the tube. Though at first she refuses to disclose much information about her and Dele ends up searching for her in vain, destiny brings them together just before the march organized to raise awareness for Dapo's condition. They seem to be a good match enjoying car rides together, sharing a similar taste in music and even television – their favorite American soap was *"Knots Landing"* - sometimes doing drugs together, though Andria didn't seem to appreciate the frequency of Dele's intake. They also had a very close intimate relationship, one

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which offered Dele many clues that she really liked him. Though their own little universe seemed perfect it could not exist in complete detachment from the outside world. Two incidents make Dele think more deeply about the implications of his romantic affair. In the first one a Caribbean young man grabs Andria by her jacket and throws her against the wall of the building behind them. Dele jumps in between them but the guy pulls out a knife and, without any threats, moves backwards. The second altercation takes place while they were sitting in the waiting room on the platform station and a Francophone African, by Dele's guess, defiantly throws reproaches at the two:

"You think you've achieved something? You think you're so great?" (Adebayo, *"Some Kind of Black"* 189)

This time Dele takes action and puts the guy down but the shame of public humiliation remains. The two seem to have built an immense bond and their relationship is anything but vulnerable in itself but, unfortunately, there is this pressure from outside that kills it. Paradoxically the bitterest judgment comes from the black population. Towards the end of the book we see Dele trying to explain Andria *"the bones of the Dapo situation"*. She listens carefully but keeps nodding *"as if she were urging him to hurry up and done."* We also find out that she never visited Dapo in the hospital but there is an excuse for her as she *"moved in a crowd where people saw a lot of fate's vagaries."* (Adebayo, *"Some Kind of Black"* 180) However she shows a lot of understanding and empathy even trying to help Dele's mother with food that she cooks at the restaurant. But moments later when he assesses the situation Dele is struck by the oddity of it all. Briefly speaking, he has a beloved sister who lies on a hospital bed, in a coma, as a result of being the victim of police racism; both his parents have suffered because of racism from the first moment they arrived in this country and here is him dating a white woman who is part of the same community that had made his sister and parents suffer. He desperately tries to find some redeeming things for the situation in front of him. That is how he comes up with the distinction between race and class. Consolation may come from the fact that his Oxford degree makes him part of the elite, upper class while Andria was just a working class woman. But as he thinks that his Oxford degree may have little value in the hands of someone who judges things from a racist perspective his confusion is greater than ever.

"But he was angry and confused, and he could not tell whether Andria had something to do with it…..He hated the police and the system and all those white things and didn't know where Andria fitted in all that. She wasn't rich, she wasn't even middle class but then neither were the Old Bill. Were their differences more important than what they had in common? …he, the Oxbridge man, was more establishment than she and yet what had befallen Dapo, and his parents in other ways, assured him that mere papers counted for little…..And again he did not know where Andria made sense in all of that – whether she was part of his past (he had come to her, after all, with unclear intentions, none of them serious and most of them bad), or whether she could be part of something that could be assembled from the wreck. But when would that be? Not now when he was clueless, and frightened, and doing too many drugs. He felt angry that she had bought him this kindness when he could not use it." (Adebayo, *"Some Kind of Black"* 185)

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The reasoning behind the break up is better understood if we take into consideration some clues offered by the author himself in an interview for a British newspaper. Here he speaks about the fact that he is very unlikely to settle down with a white girl and his decision has nothing to do with his being racist, which is not the case. He explains that in his early twenties he dated a white girl and that they tried hard to make it work but unfortunately failed

"Because often for me my commitment was affected by the fact that, outside our relationship, in the wider world, I felt there was a war on, one in which I was honor-bound to play my part. Most whites and many blacks don't think there is a war on and that's fine. Some will think there is a war on, but that their white partner, say, has nothing to do with it, and that is an eminently reasonable position too. Others are color-blind and just believe in love and that's great, if you can do it."[3]

In another interview he makes things even clearer by saying; *"Your identity fosters a kind of conservatism which can be like a prison."*[4]. Every black man, and probably not only, feels that. Dele has his Nigerian descent, which will always constitute an integral part of his personality; he also has British education and the experience of living in a western country, which in their turn contribute to the whole that make up his own *"self"*. Nevertheless, humans cannot live in isolation and society impinges upon us in a greater extent than we are aware of. It takes a lot of strength to be able to fight all the pressure coming from the outside, to de able to defy and disregard everything that the world around thinks about you.

4. Conclusion

For now, Dele seems to lack that force and probably, because of the tragedy that happened to his sister, he seems to be unwilling to search within himself and find the power to overcome external forces. The reader is left with the feeling that he may be able to do that later when his family situation will be brighter. He seems to ask for a pause not for a complete separation. The following passage is extremely illustrative in this respect.

"He couldn't stand the vulnerability their affair made him feel; the sense that the power of judgment hung over him, ready to be wielded by any man, jack, black or white on the street. And when white people let on to him when he was with her, making overtures, happy to see him basking in the mainstream, it made it worse. He found it harder to disentangle Andria from the people out there. These people that had produced one big humiliation for his family, and who knew how many small humiliations had escaped his knowledge, beginning with his father in his schooldays. And all that just set him thinking about Oxford again – just thinking about it made him feel faint. He just wanted to draw a fat red line under that whole period. Hadn't he said that Helena would be his last, even before all this? He wanted no intimate connection with those people anymore. It should just be strictly business from now on…. He felt under increasing pressure from most of his worlds to find a woman who befitted him. He couldn't square the circle. He had always been some kind of black. But now was a new stage, and he was finding out demands this latest leg would place on him, and which needs he had to satisfy. At the very least he had to put the two of them on hold." (Adebayo, *"Some Kind of Black"* 190)

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However, precisely because it is a pause that he wants and not a definitive break-up, the book could be considered optimistic. Times may change, people may change. It leaves us with the feeling that young black people are genuinely concerned with the constructions of new cultural alternatives, in which identity is created and re-created as part of an ongoing and dynamic process. This example of a search for one's true self among black youths should teach us to view them less as a unified and homogenous, externally defined and structurally constrained community, and more as a collection of individual lives, choices and experiences.

Notes

[1] "The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual. An Interview with Stuart Hall" published in "*Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader"* by Kwesi Owusu, ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 415.

[2] He makes this statement on his personal website Adebayo, Diran. "On Writing" *Diran Adebayo.* March 2005. 12 January 2009 http://www.theblessedmonkey.com/

[3] Adebayo, Diran. "Race in Britain" *The Observer* November 25 (2001).

[4] Meeke, K. "An Interview with Diran Adebayo" *Metro.co.uk.* May 2002. 11 February 2009 http://www.metro.com.uk/fame/interviews/articles.thml?in_article_id/

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