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Returning to Roots in Andrea Levy's "Back to My Own Country"

Dr Balkrishna Dada Waghmare

Teaches at Krantiagrani G. D. Bapu Lad Mahavidyalaya Kundal, (Shivaji University Kolhapur), Sangli, Maharashtra, India.

Abstract

Colonialism is the relationship of domination of indigenous by foreign invaders where the latter rule in pursuit of their interests. *Decolonization, on the other hand, is a Process by which colonies become independent of the colonizing country.* The decolonisation of the colonized can be in various forms. It may be returning to one's own religion, language, identity, culture or so on. African writers as a part of decolonization or returning to their roots started writing in indigenous languages and returned to their oral tradition. They also denounced Christianity. Andrea Levy in her essay "Back to My Own Country" gives account of symbolic her journey to her own country i.e. self-discovery and place of blacks in British history. This new knowledge enables her to claim her

rightful place and question the ignorance of majority of Britons.

Keywords: Colonialism, decolonization, roots, identity, self-discovery, empire, multiculturalism

Colonialism means control of one nation or land forcibly by a powerful nation. It was generally with the aim of economic dominance over the colonized. The colonizing country gets economically benefitted by the exploitation of the colonized country. Beside the economic gain, the colonizer country forces its religion, economics, and medicinal practices on the colonized. So, "colonialism is the relationship of domination of indigenous by foreign invaders where the latter rule in pursuit of their interests" (Veracini 5). *Decolonization, on the other hand, is a Process by which colonies become independent of the colonizing country. It is a process of undoing of colonialism. It is also an attempt to reverse the wrong that has been done to the colonized. It can be going back to the roots of one's country or culture.*

The decolonisation of the colonized can be in various forms. It may be returning to one's own religion, language, identity, culture or so on. In African context, the African writers who emerged after the Second World War opted for European languages. All the major African writers wrote in English, French and Portuguese. But by and large, all the peasants and a majority of the workers-the masses-have their own languages. So, there is a

contradiction for a writer in a neo-colonial state. "For whom does he write? For the people? But then what language does he use? Isn't the writer perpetuating, at the level of cultural practice, the very neo-colonialism he is condemning at the level of economics and that of political parties?" (Ngugi 101).

For the African writer, the language he has chosen already has chosen his audience. So, Ngugi asked his fellow writers to write in their own languages. According to him, the African writer

will have to confront the languages spoken by the people in whose service he has put his pen. Such a writer will have to rediscover the real language of struggle in the actions and speeches of his people, learn from their great heritage of orature, and above all, learn from their great optimism and faith in the capacity of human beings to remake their world and renew themselves (102-103).

Besides, writing in indigenous languages and return to their oral tradition, Africans also denounced Christianity. Ngugi was critical of Christianity which was enforced on them. Initially Ngugi was writing with the name of James Ngugi, after realization, he discontinued this name and also Christianity. He wrote *Weep Not, Child; A River Between;* and *A Grain of Wheat* and published the three novels under the name James Ngugi. James is the name which he acquired when he was baptized into Christianity in primary school, but later he rejected the name because he saw it as part of the colonial naming system when Africans

were taken as slaves to America and were given the names of the plantation owners. When Ngugi realized it, he rejected the name James and reconnected to his African name which was given at birth, and that's Ngugi wa Thiong'o which means Ngugi, son of Thiong'o.

Andrea Levy is a black British writer. Her father sailed from Jamaica to England on the *Empire Windrush* ship in 1948. She was born in London in 1956 and grew up among the whites in England. This early upbringing was the hindrance to realize her own identity. Having a whiter skin compared to other blacks, she detached herself from other blacks in England. But her exploration of her roots and a turning point in her life helped her to reclaim her real identity. She gives the confession in her latest publication is *Six Stories and an Essay*, a collection of short stories that she has written over her career. In her essay "Back to My Own Country" she talks about her Caribbean heritage and the motivation to write. She delves deep into notions of racism, her Caribbean heritage, and negation or negligence of black British history in this essay.

The essays begin with description of black fellow travelling on bus among the whites. He was trying to be friendly with other fellow passengers. But he was nothing to them. His existence wasn't of any importance to other whites on the bus. Levy feels sympathy for him but embarrassment was more than it. She tried to find similarity with him. He was one from her own. Like her parents he was there in search of better future in the mother country. Like them

he could have travelled on *Empire Windrush* ship. Levy remembers her parent's early life in Jamaica. They had large houses and servants there. They came to England for better opportunities. But mother country taught them some lessons. They spent early years homeless or in small houses. They have to follow certain social restrictions like to get on in this country they should live quietly and not make a fuss, be as respectable as they possibly could, go to church on Sundays, keep their children well dressed and scrubbed behind the ears etc. They were immigrants in this country and they had to accept whatever was offered by the country. They were even not allowed use their cockney or draw attention by other blacks. These early experiences create hindrances in accepting the man on the bus as one among them. So, Andrea Levy finds that "The man was different. He looked different and he sounded different" (04).

Andrea Levy's isolation from other blacks started from her early childhood. Her parents deliberately avoided their own people. She was not allowed to mix with other black children. Her parents believed "themselves to be of a higher class than any darker-skinned person" (07) and "the colour of your skin was one of the most important things about you" (08). So, the writer tried to be a British as she could be. She started to hate or be ashamed her Caribbean origin. Then there was a life-changing moment. When she was working part-time for a sex-education project for young people in Islington, she had to take part in a racism awareness course. They were asked to split

into two groups, black and white. She tried to choose the white group where she was at ease but ended on the black side. It sent her to bed for a week and realization of her origin. Her denial of the self was replaced with acceptance. She came to know that it was every black person's life in England. After a few months, she visited Jamaica and explored her ancestry and her background.

Her self-discovery helped her from understanding herself and her place in society. According to her, "Writing came to my rescue" (11) and "Being black in a majority white country comes with a myriad of complications and contradictions" (11). This new knowledge enabled her to answer questions on black people's presence in England. She sheds lights on the ignorance of majority of Britons. She makes clear that industrial revolution forced non-whites to Britain. This forced migration is responsible for multicultural condition in England. End of slavery in 1833 was also more beneficial to slave owners as they were given huge compensation but slaves history wasn't recorded properly. She calls it as "all this happened 3,000 miles away from Britain, and as a result it has been possible for it to quietly disappear from British mainstream history. This is the absence, the gap in knowledge, the amnesia of the British that made the black man on the bus such an alien" (14). There chapters in the history about slave trade but not about slaves and their condition. Levy further calls on the historian Stuart Hall to make it clear. She quotes him as "Euro-scepticism and Little England nationalism could hardly survive if people

understood whose sugar flowed through English blood and rotted English teeth" (17). She opines that there are still countless young Britons today of Afro-Caribbean descent who have as little understanding of their ancestry and have as little evidence of their worth and there are countless white Britons who are unaware of the histories that bind them together. So, like millions of other British black people of Caribbean extract, Andrea Levy has more than one country to call her own. The journey suggested in the title has been one of learning and self-discovery. It is about claiming one's rightful place in society in the face of challenging and oppressive circumstances. Levy urges that both blacks and whites in England are contributors to history and the products of history. The empire has set on the sweat of the colonized and the mother country owes to them.

Andrea Levy's returning to root or self-discovery is different from other writers. African writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'O completely denied their association with colonial aspects. They claimed their own tribal identity, culture and language. On the other hand, Andrea Levy maintains balance between these two opposite worlds. She finds both are interdependent. Multicultural condition is the product of this post-colonial condition and slave trade. So, she claims the heritage and history of both countries i.e. England and Jamaica, as her own. She calls herself "Black-British" writer.

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About the Author

Dr. Balkrishna Dada Waghmare teaches at Krantiagrani G. D. Babu Lad Mahavidyalaya Kundal (Shivaji University Kolhapur), Sangli, Maharashtra, India.

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