

Black British Women Writers Challenging And Changing The Black Narrative Through Their Writings : Aminatta Forna's Attempt Through Her Novels

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ABSTRACT:

This paper tries to explore Fornas attempt to boost the confidence of black people by talking about the progressiveness of their culture and tradition, which led to more acceptance of the African diaspora along with other coloured people. Aminatta Forna writes through and beyond personal experience to speak to the wider world in subtly constructed narratives that reveal the ongoing aftershocks of living through violence and war. Forna has challenged the narrative of civilisation and advancement through colonisation. She has raised the issue of exploitation by colonisation in public domain as many Britishers are not aware of the aftermath of colonisation, and some people are indifferent about the impacts of colonisation on these native people. She has attempted to tell readers what war did to the natives of the country, how adversely this has affected them. War created a psychological dent on every citizen's mind.

Key Words: Forna, Colonisation, War, Exploitation, Violence, Culture, Native People.

Gina Wisker in her book *Black Women's Writing*, quotes Lauretta Ngcobo about problems faced by Black British women in their writings: that the theme, content, expression of Black British women's writing is not easily assimilable in the context of a white readership, for much of what is explored is a clear indictment of the society from which that readership springs:

We as Black writers at times displease our white readership. Our writing is seldom genteel since it springs from our experiences which in real life have none of the trimmings of gentility. If the truth be told, it cannot titillate the aesthetic palates of many white people, for deep down it is criticism of their values and their treatment of us throughout history. (12)

Jackie Roy looks at the issues of studying and writing about Black women's writing in higher education today. She is wary of the interest of the white literary academy since it seems like so much bandwagon-jumping at times. However, as she points out, once entry into the discourse of contemporary critical theory has been made (difficult for marginalized groups, among them many Black women students and returners) the essentially radical nature of this criticism will enable a variety of readings of texts, will underline the social and political message that social position and experience are the result of a particular mixture of effects at a particular moment... She points out the potential and the flaws of feminist theory which:

...presents a major challenge to patriarchal structures, though for black women it is limited by its failure to engage consistently and

effectively with black issues, often subsuming these to encompass all women in a form of essentialism which denies the specificity of black women's experience. (14)

Jackie argues for the inclusion of more books by Black writers on the syllabus, more Black lecturers to teach the courses, and for the widespread use of such Black literary criticism as has emerged, largely from America. This would go some way; she feels towards ensuring that the only voice on Black writing is not that of a white speaker or writer. (14)

As Wisker elaborates on what provokes these Black British women writers to defy the expected writing from them and writing a new discourse. She writes, "Jakie Kay herself, in 'So You Think I'm a Mule?', produces a poem which suggests a dialogue between a woman of mixed race and the prying white questioner who wishes to categorize her- detrimentally – seeing her as 'half-caste', part of the 'mixed – race problem', when she is in no doubt of her own racial background, and her pride in it:

And when they shout 'Nigger'
Ain't nobody debating my Blackness
...I'm not mixed up about it
There's a lot of us Blackwomen, struggling to define
Just who we are. (11)

Wisker extends this and says:

Here the speaker and the language celebrate identity in a universalizing statement which yet recognizes difference. Others are speechless to define her, but she has her own voice now, content with her background and identity. (11)

The 'schizophrenia' of retaining one's culture in another cultural environment is also noted by Black British women artists such as Sonia Boyce who said in 1983:

I am a British born of West Indian parents. I live a schizophrenic life, between an anglicized background and a West Indian foreground; to put it another way, between 'but look at my trials nah' and 'gaw blimey'. My work tries to reconcile both of these. (11)

From 1982 to 1995 the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books -- initiated through a collective led by John La Rose -- contributed to positioning emerging black authors as part of the British literary scene, while also showcasing the international character and the radicalism usually associated with the Black literary tradition. Today, however, in the context of book fairs, Black writing from Britain seems to have become relatively less noticeable. The 2014 Brussels Book Fair, whose 'guest of honour' was the UK, might be taken as a measure of this development. It is indeed striking that of the twenty-three 'top' British authors present (the most famous being Jonathan Coe), none had roots in Africa, Asia or the Caribbean, with the exception of two white writers born respectively in Zambia and Tunisia, A. C. Grayling and Patrick McGuinness. When one considers that the event had been put together by the British Council, the British Embassy and the bookseller Waterstones, and that the theme was 'History, in all its aspects ... notably, the Centenary Commemoration of the First World War', this all-white line up does not bode well for the way Britain sees her past and, more worryingly, how she represents herself culturally in the heart of Europe. Even

though books by Zadie Smith and Monica Ali were for sale in the Fair's Waterstones bookshop, the Britain showcased that week was, to say the least, misleading in ignoring the considerable contributions made by black and Asian writers to British literary history and heritage.

Benedicte Ledent writes '...institutionalised racism is still very much present in Britain. As Joan Anim-Addo and Les Back point out, 'the legacy of Empire is still in evidence' in British universities, both in terms of the absence of black British texts from the curriculum and of black academics, especially female ones. Nathan E. Richards highlights the persistence of racial discrimination in the academic world, causing a form of 'brain drain' whereby such authors as Fred D'Aguiar, Aminatta Forna, Caryl Phillips and Zadie Smith have left the UK to take up academic appointments in the US.' (2-3)

As IrenosenOkoje observes:

Britain doesn't champion the voices of its female writers of colour enough, preferring to fawn over international writers. Some will wheel out names of the usual suspects, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. Yes, I know about them, but they are just two writers from the past 15 years, and are by no means a barometer to measure the typical representation of women of colour in the industry. Both studied at Oxbridge, and both

are of mixed race. What does this say to black and Asian writers: do you have to have an elite education and a white parent for the publishing industry to be interested? (3)

Aminatta Forna writes through and beyond personal experience to speak to the wider world in subtly constructed narratives that reveal the ongoing aftershocks of living through violence and war. —Windham-Campbell Prize citation

Aminatta Forna's works explore the historical, cultural, and emotional repercussions of societies that have experienced conflict. Her first three books – *The Devil that Danced on the Water* (2002), *Ancestor Stones* (2006), and *The Memory of Love* (2010) – are set in Sierra Leone.

Aminatta Forna's work represents the psychological aspect of the black people which is dented, traumatised by the colonisation of Britain. colonisation not only took away their place but their culture, tradition, language, identity and everything else which make them unique in their own way. In *Ancestor Stones*, Forna talks about the stones, "Each stone chosen and given in memory of a woman to her daughter. So that their spirits would be recalled each time the stone was held, warmed by human hand, and cast on the ground to ask for help." (Forna 56). These stones were passed from generations, mother gave it to her daughters, these were ancestor stones. She writes about one of the characters of her novel 'one day her mother was studying the stones when her father came to the room and saw her, he wanted to end these superstitious practices, so he threw away all her stones away. This shattered her completely because she called them 'Ancestors'. One day she went away for never to return.' And her father called this superstition.

This way Forna wanted to tell how the foreign culture brought through colonization has destroyed the indigenous culture of the land. This has adversely impacted the psyche of the

natives. That's why her mother lost her mental health and never returned. Forna wanted the readers to feel that how one feels when one is stripped of its culture. She always brings the black people in public view and discuss their issues with reasoning and sympathy. She is writing about her home country, where colonization by Britain has made the natives feel less human than Britishers/colonisers in their own country. Then how can one expect them to be fair with black people on their own land.

Forna researched every minute aspects of the novel writing process, she studied the language, so that she can write the true essence or meaning in English language. She brought the original culture, language and tradition of Africa in the public domain with full confidence. In a subtle way she demanded the acceptance as well as appreciation of the African culture. For example, in *Ancestor Stones*, she describes that Gibril Kholifa, was a polygamous man, but she represented this polygamous family structure as beneficial to all women involved in it. She presented its positive aspects like it was more progressive by giving freedom to women as it did not burdened women with household chores and children rearing responsibilities.

Forna here contradicts the White Feminism's concept of 'patriarchy' by presenting 'polygamy' as more progressive concept for women in Africa. She is presenting that various African traditions and cultures in positive light and progressive which West tagged them as altogether backward and retrogressive.

In her another novel *The Memory of Love*, Forna deals with the issues of war, pain and post-war trauma. She has attempted to tell readers what war did to the natives of the country, how adversely this has affected them. War created a psychological dent on every citizen's mind. This Forna has written very eloquently in the novel, 'This is their reality. And who is going to come and give the people who live *here* therapy to cope with this? Asks Attila ... You call it disorder, my friend. We call it *life*.' (Forna 319).

Forna wanted readers especially the West to see what colonisers has done to other countries in trying to satisfy their own needs through colonisation and imperialism. West especially Britain is very proud of itself that it has brought civilisation in these countries but this is not true. They exploited these countries and in return destroyed their indigenous culture and damaged their psyche forever.

Forna has challenged the narrative of civilisation and advancement through colonisation. She has raised the issue of exploitation by colonisation in public domain as many Britishers are not aware of the aftermath of colonisation, and some people are indifferent about the impacts of colonisation on these native people.

Whenever we talk about Black people it is not just about their position in dominant culture but also how countries like Britain who were involved in imperialism has damaged and destroyed the colonised country in every aspect. This has destroyed their rich tradition of art and literature resulting in lack of confidence and feeling of rootlessness and alienation. From their country to their place in immigrant country they suffer from feeling of inferiority. Forna through this novel took effort to talk about the consequences of war and colonisation. How it has led to lack of confidence in people and gave boost to mass emigration. Displacing people from their land in search of better life, safe and secure place to live in. She wanted to show how racism and colonisation is retrogressive for black people. She wants to bring these topics

in main narrative so that it is discussed and boost confidence of the black people in their own country as well as in dominant culture as well.

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