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The Politics of 'Black' Identity: A Study of Selected Poems of Benjamin Zephaniah

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Abstract: A performer-poet of Caribbean origin, living in England, Benjamin Zephaniah's (1958-2023) poetry aims to counterbalance the long-standing White supremacy that directly and/or indirectly jeopardizes the identity of the Black Britons. Widely regarded as one of the most distinct as well as controversial 'other' voices, he ventilates the experiences of racial discrimination and socio-cultural oppression that the Black and brown-skinned immigrants in Britain are susceptible to. But his poems do not simply throb with the tension and anguish of the marginalized but question the logic of domination. In his poems, by celebrating his ancestral Afro-Caribbean heritage, Zephaniah aims to pour a sense of resistance that would permit and encourage the 'coloured' people to feel proud of their difference. The present paper will discuss four poems of Zephaniah, like "We Refugees," "The Race Industry," "Neighbours," and "White Comedy," with a specific purpose to explore how the poet attempts to diminish the dominant ideology of Englishness/Whiteness with a view to articulating the suppressed voice of the Black immigrants. The poems to be discussed amply show that even words of compassion and empathy are not without self-congratulatory politics, satisfying ultimately the White ego. Zephaniah, therefore, always warns the readers of the unrecognizable operation of linguistic and cultural dominance that intends to hegemonize and control the oppressed. The present paper, hence, proposes to examine how the said poems delve into the biased socio-cultural matrix of England to reveal the 'reality' behind its mask of democracy and secularism. It will also focus on how Zephaniah, in these poems especially, proposes a politics of alterity, not of alienation, as a potential means to survive and sustain in the exclusively hierarchical English society.

Key Words: Alienation, Alterity, Race, Black Briton

In this article a few poems by the Caribbean-British poet Benjamin Zephaniah are going to be discussed in order to highlight the representation of identity poetics in his poems like We Refugees", "The Race Industry", "Neighbours," and "White Comedy". It intends to see and show how in these poems Zephaniah attempts to diminish the dominant ideology of Englishness/Whiteness with a view to articulating the suppressed voice of the Black immigrants. Though the tone and mood of these poems vary, they share a common ground of protest against the racial and ethnic discrimination. C.P.Jones, in his article "Confronting Institutionalized Racism" defines racism as a "system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on phenotype ("race")" that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities, while unfairly advantaging other (Jones, 10). This apparently unambiguous observation does match with the poems of Zephaniah, who by using colloquial words and expressions in a rhythm easy to follow and comprehend, gives unique perspectives to the issues which other people either overlook or repeat some hackneyed verbatim to address. These four poems, to be discussed, capture and replay idiomatic expression of a Black immigrant writer, obviously with a difference.

After World War II, Great Britain witnessed mass migration, which changed its demographic cosmopolitanism more prominently than ever. It results in the formation of a modern multicultural nation-state shaped by the ethnic diversity of its citizenship. People from its former colonies, like Africa, the Caribbean and South Asian locations, arrive at the land carrying diasporic sensibilities, literary and cultural heritages that not only leave a creative impact but profoundly transform the British national culture, leading to a more complex and inclusive sense of its past. English literature from then on has been influenced by

the British Black and Asian writers whose writings are triggered by multiple and diverse themes like colonialism, migration, multiculturalism, globalization, ethno- cultural and racial diversity, and so on - issues which remained mostly unheard in the mainstream British cultural output. While commenting on the recent scenario of the British Black and Asian writing since 1980, Chris Weedon brilliantly illustrates, "the period 1980-2010 saw an increase and diversification in writing by Black and Asian writers in the UK, augmented thematically and aesthetically by work from generations born and/or educated in Britain and their new configurations of questions of difference and identity" (Weedon, 40). Marked by the effects of social and institutionalized racial exclusion, contemporary writing of this sect does not limit itself by offering only imaginative retellings of the past but dissects the colonial past and its cultural and financial looting, analyses the factors that caused the ongoing and increasing geographical displacement, and questions as well as debates why they are to face racialised inequalities despite their legal British citizenship. However, some writers like Abdulrazak Gurnah and Caryl Phillips bring to the fore the plight and desperation of the illegal immigrants, emphasising that their status is not necessarily a testimony of their criminality.

Public discourses on race, ethnicity, and diversity are important to understanding contemporary British Black and Asian writing. Although racial discrimination was made illegal in the 1970s, the viability of institutional and interpersonal racism remains highly operative and occupies a central stage in contemporary literary works as well. They frequently explore and address the tormenting experiences of cultural and social exclusion in their writings. In 1966, Home Secretary Roy Jenkins publicly introduced multiculturalism accepting the multi-ethnic realities of Britain, with an aim to ensure equal opportunity and tolerance despite the vast cultural diversity. The race riots in the 70s, 80s, and other harrowing instances in the recent past clearly show that multiculturalism fails to accommodate and secure the rights of the minorities. It has been accused of creating separate communities in which minorities refuse to integrate, cutting themselves off from the mainstream society, as Stephen Jivraj in his report has noted. David Blunkett's idea of the "Life in the UK" test in 2002 tends to shift Britain from its so-called multicultural outlook to a new model of citizenship based on some shared civic values, ethical behaviour and social responsibility. But he, perhaps, overlooks that the complexities of multi-ethnic Britain defy any homogenizing policy. The situation has become worse after the September 11th attacks in the USA and the 2005 London bombings. Amidst all these British Black and Asian writings, has a strong presence prior to 1980 and they continue to feature prominently. It is not surprising, therefore, that academic interest in Black and/or Asian British culture should have begun to respond to these developments since the 1980s and is now seen to be rapidly expanding.

This complicated socio-cultural positioning points to the complex trajectory of the construction of identity and the operation of identity politics, which served as the genesis for the writers and the scholars alike. The mechanisms of exclusion and the problems caused by racialisation are frequently pronounced in the poems (selected in this article) by Benjamin Zephaniah. The wide range of writing explores the physical, cultural, emotional, and virtual locations of diasporic life of both the first and subsequent generations of immigrants. Stuart Hall believes construction of "a shared national identity…dependents on the cultural meanings which bind each member individually into the larger national story" (4). But this identity and/or cultural meaning is confined to the recalcitrant "ethnic" hegemony of the UK as white. British Black and Asian writing overtly and covertly confronts the presentation of England as a space without Black subjects or with Black subjects as foreign presences within a stable and homogeneous nation-state. Much of this writing has been shaped by the resistance of hegemonic discourses of Whiteness. Black functions as a confident proclamation of identity. Textual representations of Black British experience have been increasingly marked by a Du Boisian double consciousness. This brings 'two-ness' to the fore - an alignment with Bhabha's model of a 'third space'. In Bhabha's model, ideas of sameness/difference combine, reveal their components, and showcase their interdependence. Following his theory, British Black and Asian writing can be taken as a way of negotiating and working through the latent possibilities contained within British identity. Writings of this types troubles concepts of a fixed, racialised Britishness by presenting the sameness of 'Black' and 'white' characters. These writings confirm how Britishness is predicated on Asian, African, and Caribbean difference and how recognition of that relationship can be used to reframe Britishness itself.

Poetry, composed by Black and Asian Britons is customarily positioned as transnational rather than British and is seldom linked to Britain's older literary traditions. British Asian and Black poets make British poetry productive by merging it with popular traditions of Caribbean poetic forms like dub poetry. Through this form the poets of this group express a belief that has at once diasporic sensibility and transcultural appeal. A performer-poet of Caribbean origin, living in England, Benjamin Zephaniah expresses his observation of contemporary racist Britain in a form that is rooted in his ancestral culture. His poems are explicit and critical commentary on the social, political, and cultural scenario of England. Zephaniah believes politically he is British, culturally Caribbean and a philanthropist in his heart. His poetry is characterized by a wide range of themes and subjects: race relations, police brutality, environmental issues, male chauvinism, the royal family, the oral traditions, etc. Born and brought up in an area of Birmingham where every day he was reminded of his colour, Zephaniah counters the anti-immigrant propaganda spun by the narrow-minded politician and mainstream media. However, to stand up against these oppressive and authoritarian forces, he devises the strategy of the formation of collective identity, which he believes has the potentiality to defy such divisions and prevent the empowerment of institutionally racist structures. In an interview he makes himself quite clear: "the solution to getting rid of systematic racism is to tear it down. I'm a revolutionary and these institutions, including the police, need to be disbanded, torn down, and we need to start again". His poems with surprising creativity emphasize on cultural diversity and alterity and confront the homogenizing and marginalizing policy lurking behind the vulnerable veil of globalization. With Christopher Wulf, Zephaniah strongly believes, "cultural diversity protects creativity and requires respect for differences and alterity. However, the right to cultural diversity can only claim validity insofar as other human rights are not violated" (Wulf, 7). The poems I am going to discuss here namely "We Refugees", "The Race Industry", "Neighbours", and "White Comedy amply show how Zephaniah proposes a politics of alterity not of alienation, as a potential means to survive and sustain in the exclusively hierarchical English society.

The experiences of people from other cultures are central to the development of a modern nation. The strong waves of migratory movements threaten the presumption of "unambiguous cultural identity" (Wulf, 12). This again problematises the relationship between the inhabitants and the immigrants, indicating the inevitably biased dichotomy of us and other. However, this construction of other is relational and contextual. In a country like Britain, recognition and acceptance of diversity and alterity are essential and can even help to prevent violent ethno-racial conflicts. In his poem "We Refugees" Zephaniah ponders these issues. The poem, with a first-person narrator, deals with the theme of (literal and metaphorical) refuge and its difficult circumstances and consequences. Zephaniah reflects that the history of migration is not time and space specific, and the poem informs that migrancy is one of the fundamental truths of human existence: "We can all be refugees/ Nobody is safe". The powerful refrain again is a strong statement to denounce the conception of purity and privilege that the natives boast of. It begins with, "I come from a musical place/ Where they shoot me for my song/ And my brother has been tortured / By my brother in my land". The poem begins with a tone of regret and nostalgia, but soon it turns to be a critical nostalgia as the spatio-temporal distance allows him to be critical and evaluative. The country of origin may be Afghanistan, "where girls cannot go to school" and "even young boys must grow beards". But the escape does not confirm security. It rather enhances the plight, depriving a refugee of no specific identity, and even if s/he is allowed to have one, it is of and as 'other': "I am told I have no country now/ I am told I am a lie/ I am told that modern history books/ may forget my name". The ending of the poem, as expected from Zephaniah, links not only refugees of diverse socio-political backgrounds but unsettles the presumption of 'legal citizenship' or 'rightful inhabitance': "We all came from refugees…We all came here from somewhere". By placing the inhabitants and the immigrants on the same plain, Zephaniah thus not only counters the traditional presumptions but also opens up a new way of thinking. Refugees ought not to be discarded as obnoxious others as this act ultimately may lead us to be disrespectful to our predecessors as: "Nobody's here without a struggle".

In the poem "The Race industry", Zephaniah uses his incisive wit. It is written in free verse with inconsistent rhythm. The poem here questions the ethics of representation. It is an attack directed at the scholars and the industrialists who consider the Black folks as either a proliferating academic project or submissive labour, ready to work despite awfully low wages. Zephaniah regrets that the Black Britons are exploited as 'raw materials' for the race industry, which only profits and satisfies the interests of the White exploiters. The real development of the Blacks is, however, a far cry. The opening lines: "The coconuts have got the jobs./ The race industry is a growth industry" wittily capture how, in the name of giving jobs,

the Blacks are dehumanized. The word 'coconut' if can be considered a direct reference to the people from Caribbean islands; the 'nut' part may be taken as an anagram of 'blockhead'- the 'quality' the Whites invariably attribute to the Blacks. In the 5th line, "Uncle Tom's" is a phrase for the Black people who are subservient and ready to follow the order. The 15th line, "They take our sufferings and earn a salary," expresses that the unscrupulous policy of representing the Blacks ultimately is directed to the ambition of materialistic profit. In the final section the diatribe becomes more pointed and vengeful. The three lines, all beginning with the word 'without' make it clear that Black lives do matter, and without them the White would not have been able to flourish in the way that they have done.

The poem "Neighbour" is mainly about the discrimination and racism in a society where people tend to make rash and judgmental decisions solely on the basis of race and skin colour. The title is highly intriguing and emphasizes the futility of discrimination between the British and the immigrants when they live next door to each other. Zephaniah argues that no ethnic group can live in isolation in today's multicultural Britain. Zephaniah lists the stereotyped words and phrases used to describe a Black person: "Black', "foreign", "big", "dreadlocks", "uneducated grass eater" etc. In the third stanza the poet graphically presents how a Black person intrudes in a White man's space. The Black unhesitatingly speaks of his "aromas" which he envisages "will occupy /Your space". He asserts, "Our ball will be in your court/ How will you feel?" The ending has a Zephaniahan flavor. The Black person's declaration, "I am the type you are supposed to love" sounds like a counterattack directed towards the White men's prejudice. It can be said, through the account of the first-person narrator, Zephaniah makes his argument even more vibrant, appealing, and critical. The Black folks have no other alternative but to put up resistance otherwise, they would surely perish. However, Zephaniah prescribes the strategy of coexistence, accepting diversity, not driven by any prejudice.

It will be appropriate to conclude the paper by saying a few words on the poem "White Comedy", which by an intricate web of connotation, elegantly reveals the way the English language is sketched against the people of colour. The poem forces the readers to re-examine the way the very word 'Black' is used and what it intends to mean. Zephaniah uses lots of words and phrases by replacing the 'Black' part with the 'white' part to see whether the changed words and phrases can still create the same sensation. He uses 'whitemailed' for 'Blackmailed', 'white witch' for 'Black witch', 'white sheep' for 'Black sheep', 'white death' for 'Black death' and so on. While analyzing the poem Steve Heighes observes, "the poem suggests that racism is deeply embedded in language itself". The concluding lines: "Don't worry,/ I shall be writing to de Black House" are the poem's last meaningful joke, underscoring at once the unending seclusion and necessity for resistance to counter it.

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