



**IDENTITY CRISIS IN ANDREA LEVY'S *SMALL ISLAND* (2004)**

**A part of an MA Thesis entitled as (Identity Crisis in Multicultural London: A Study of Andrea Levy's *Small Island* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*)**

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**ABSTRACT**

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The most central topic of discussion in social and cultural research field today is that of identity. Identity is a socio cultural phenomenon which is closely related to the sense of belonging. When immigrants move from one place to another, such sense no longer accompanies them, when this takes place, they often undergo an identity crisis. Andrea Levy presents the immigrant experience in her novel *Small Island* by focusing on two immigrants who settle in London. Then, the characters, Gilbert and Hortense go through an identity crisis. These characters do not feel welcomed because of racism

and prejudice. They feel alienated instead. This study focuses on the immigrant's experiences and the loss of belonging which ultimately activates an identity crisis. It will also highlight Levy's formulation of identity which will lead to the creation of strong hybrid identities.

**Keywords:** Levy, Identity, colonialism, hybridity

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Andrea Levy (1956 - ) is a postcolonial author who was born in London in 1956 to Jamaican parents. Levy has written five novels which all deal with postcolonial issues. Levy's parents sailed on the historical Empire Windrush to England in 1948. They were colonial immigrants from Jamaica and although Levy herself was born in London she still feels she needs to defend her identity. She was interested in exploring the experience of being British and Black; "the new identity" (Levy, 2014) as she calls it herself. *Small Island* (hereafter *SI*) is Levy's most autobiographical novel. The experience of her parents, as colonial immigrants settling in London and arriving on the Empire Windrush, is the main source of inspiration for Levy's novel *SI*. The novel moves back and forth in time and place. The novel goes back and forth between "Before" and "1948" and between Jamaica and London. Levy put the central focus on the period before and after the arrival of the Windrush generation. "The novel explicitly takes the arrival of the Windrush migrants in Britain, rather than the end of the war, as its narrative watershed is indicative of an attempt to confront established historiographies" (Perfect, 2014, p. 66). In 1948 there were still no immigration restrictions on citizenship for people

from former British colonies but the impact these immigrants had on the ‘Mother Country’ was immensely. Every single character in this novel goes through some sort of an identity crisis. Levy presents the concept of identity in relation to culture by four different point of views. Each character is as important as the other and each goes through an identity crisis. The experiences of both British citizens and Black British colonial immigrants in the plot of the novel is exposed through two couples: the British couple Queenie and Bernard and the Jamaican Hortense and Gilbert. Through these characters Levy deals with the change of the British social identity wherein they all had to establish their place in the new social environment.

### **1. Britain as a ‘Mother Country’**

According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1932 – 2014), “there is no understanding Englishness without understanding its imperial and colonial dimensions” (Hall, 2008). Imperial powers have all engaged in some kind of colonialism throughout their history. According to Dobie (2015) colonialism means the subjection of one population to another which can mean the physical conquest or in more subtle forms which involve political, economic, and cultural domination. In the British context, the experience of colonialism played a significant role in shaping ideas about race.

Levy opens up the novel with a “Prologue” from the perspective of Queenie, the British white woman, at the Empire Exhibition in 1924 on an organized trip. There at the exhibition she meets the ‘Other’. The man is displayed as merely an object for the British people to look at with both fear and wonder:

But then suddenly there was a man. An African man. A black man who looked to be carved from melting chocolate. I clung to Emily but she shooed me off. He was right next to me, close enough so I could see him breathing. A monkey man sweating a smell of mothballs. Blacker than when you smudge your face with a sooty cork. The droplets of sweat on his forehead glistened and shone like jewels. His lips were brown, not pink like they should be, and they bulged with hair like bicycle tyres. His hair was woolly as a black shorn sheep. His nose, squashed flat, had two nostrils big as train tunnels. And he was looking down at me ... He could have swallowed me up, this big nigger man. But instead he said, in clear English, 'Perhaps we could shake hands instead?' ... And I shook an African man's hand. It was warm and slightly sweaty like everyone else's. (Levy, 2004, p. 6)

This encounter is told in the prologue of *SI* from the perspective of Queenie's reminiscences of her visit to the British Empire exhibition as a child. In this exhibition Britain showcased or tried to reconstruct "the Empire in little" (Levy, 2004, p. 3). The opinion of the exhibition visitors in these first few pages shows the ignorance of the British population in general towards the rest of their Empire. Graham and Emily, friends of Queenie, point out the uncivilized things they see; a woman sitting in the dirt whose hands are weaving cloth on a loom while "we've got machines that do all that now" (ibid, p. 5). Emily goes even further when she says she won't be able to understand them because "they're not civilized. They only understand drums" (ibid, p. 5). When the Black man asks Queenie in clear English if they could shake hands she is perplexed that his English is so good. This could be seen as an attack to the ignorance of the British people. The encounter of Queenie shaking the Black man's hand can also be a foreshadowing of Queenie accepting the 'Other' later in the novel instead of discriminating them. Queenie



seemed to be the only one to be curious instead of afraid of the exotic and unknown. As noted by Ellis (2012) this particular event in Queenie's life frames her subjectivity and identity when she is an adult in the aftermath of the war. But not only does this event structure Queenie's personal narrative it also shows the historical encounter of Britain as an Empire.

The "Prologue" frames the novel in a colonial framework and highlights the connection between the 'Mother Country' and her colonies. The "Prologue" leads the reader to one of the most important historical events of Britain: the start of contemporary multicultural Britain in "1948". The arrival of the Empire Windrush at Tilbury Docks, Essex, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June 1948 with 539 Jamaicans on board is according to Rodgers and Ahmed (2018) symbolically marked as the start of cross-cultural and interracial encounters in Britain. Many of men on board had fought for Britain during the Second World War (hereafter WWII) in the Royal Air Force (hereafter RAF).

After the WWII, Jamaica was in a bad economic situation. Poverty and unemployment were major factors for the Jamaicans to leave their island. In 1944 Jamaica was struck by a hurricane which left many people homeless and when the 'Mother Country' promised employment many, like Gilbert, believed "there is opportunity ripe out there" (Levy, 2004, p. 207). All their hopes were set on the 'Mother Country' because most of the Jamaicans defined themselves as British, like Gilbert and Hortense. Gilbert justifies his right to settle in Britain after the war because he fought during the war for his 'Mother Country'. He was a volunteer for

the RAF because he had felt responsible, both as a Jew and as a British citizen to fight Adolf Hitler. Like Gilbert, many colony troops fought for their idealized British Empire. Hortense, on the other hand, justifies it because she believed she was educated to become a teacher, whether that would be in Jamaica or Britain but preferably in Britain because there she would “have a big house with a bell at the front door” (ibid, p. 11).

The unity that was formed after colonization was not because colonial immigrants felt they belonged to the ‘Mother Country’ but rather many colonial immigrants that moved to the ‘Mother Country’ only had a sense of unity that was caused by suffering. Therefore, the sense of Britishness felt by colonial immigrants had been shaped by their immigrant history from former British colonies to Britain. The dual cultural heritage of hybrids is the central point of focus. These hybrids, affected by their loss of identity and belonging, suffered and created their own place of belonging, a “space in-between the designations of identity” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). Hybrids created their own British identity; one that was born in a former British colony and further developed in a multicultural Britain.

## **2. The Sense of Belonging**

A question of belonging rises up when people move from their home, their own culture and community, to another. “It is often pointed out that a sense of mutual belonging is manufactured by the performance of various traditions, narratives, rituals and symbols which stimulate an individual’s sense of being a member of a particular national collective” (McLeod, 2010, p. 57). A sense of



Britishness born in the colonized would have been logical after the Jamaicans, for example, fought during the WWII for their ‘Mother Country’ or after the names of canals in England were taught at schools in Jamaica.

The first group of immigrants held British passports but after the decline and collapse of the British Empire, migration policies were regulated. The thought of assimilating the immigrants only caused more tension. As noted by Julios (2008) the conservative party tightened the Commonwealth immigration in 1962 and in 1968 the act was amended to be superseded by the new immigration act of 1971 which introduced the concept of partiality or right of abode; only work permit holders or descendants of people who were born in Britain gained entry into the country. According to Scott (2017) the characters in *S/* experience themselves in a place which is home to them but it is also a place in which they are being told that they are not from there. “This is the complex knot of un-belonging” (Scott, 2017, p. 277) The physical appearance of the immigrants had placed them in a binary position as the ‘other’ or ‘Black’ against the ‘self’ and ‘White’. This type of alienation leads to an identity crisis.

Colonial education, alienation, the false romanticized images of the ‘Mother Country’, the desire for motherly affection are all causes for the internal split of the colonial characters between their origin and the appropriated imperialistic culture. The search for identity; the self-awareness of one’s own personality is a central theme in postcolonial literature. Individuals in a colonized or formerly colonized nation suffer in reconstructing their identity because they



often feel less important. They feel oppressed and politically, culturally and economically marginalized.

The blind loyalty for the ‘Mother Country’ and the sense of Britishness in colonized people does not create an identity crisis but the alienation and discrimination they face does. The colonizer believes the colonized are different. The difference can lie in their skin colour, their language or accent or even their place of birth. Even when the colonized are brought up thinking they are British, when placed in the heart of the Empire, they often go through an identity crisis because they do not feel welcomed or because they had to “redefine their sense of belonging” (Fernandez, 2009, p. 150).

In the novel Gilbert Joseph, much like Levy’s father, protected the ‘Mother Country’ during the war as a volunteer in the RAF. Gilbert quite often uses the metaphor of Britain as a ‘Mother Country’. He felt he was British and he was quite proud to belong to the Empire. He is a young and carefree man who is thrilled to join the RAF. His colonial education inspired him to join the RAF. Despite his education and training he was only given a job as a postman driver and coal shifter. He is assigned below his skills only because of his race. Gilbert arrives on the Empire Windrush in 1948 and settles in London. He is one of the pioneers in creating a contemporary multicultural Britain. His wife Hortense, similarly to Levy’s mother, joins her husband six months later. “Both have grown up with an image of England as populated largely by mannered and agreeably polite individuals who spend much of their spare time immersing themselves in the magnificent cultural



heritage of the motherland, and both are horribly disappointed” (Bradford, 2007, p. 209).

When arriving in London Gilbert believes he still has the privileges that he had during the war as an airman. But the opposite is true:

In five, no, in six places, the job I had gone for vanish with one look upon my face. Another, I wait, letter in my hand, while everyone in this office go about their business as if I am not there. I can feel them watching me close as a pickpocket with his prey but cannot catch even a peeping twinkle of an eye. Until a man come in agitated. ‘What’re you doing here? He say to me. We don’t want you. There’s no job for you here. I’m going to get in touch with that labour exchange, tell them not to send any more of you people. We can’t use your sort. Go on, get out’”. (Levy, 2004, p. 313)

Levy shows here the first generation of Jamaicans (often called the Windrush generation) were not allowed to participate in the society. At the start of multicultural London, the Black immigrants had to deal with harsh discrimination. The racial segregation becomes obvious when Gilbert goes to the cinema with Queenie and her father-in-law. When Gilbert taps Queenie in the cinema to whisper “the usherette say we have to go to the back” (Levy, 2004, p. 183) only to hear the usherette say “not her. You. You have to go up the back” (ibid, p. 183). This shows the insufficiency in which the British society dealt with presence of the first generation of colonial immigrants.

#### **4. Racism and Prejudice**

The most significant change in British society occurred when non-white people immigrated after WWII. People from (former) British colonies were recruited to come to work in Britain. The new immigrants, mostly from the New Commonwealth countries, were the focus of attention. The earliest signs “of their impact on the host society was the unavoidable strain put on Britain’s welfare system; whether housing, employment, health or education services, the continuous influx of immigrant families saw them competing with their fellow British counterparts for the allocation of scarce resources” (Julios, 2008, pp. 16-17).

Despite the encouraging invitation of the ‘Mother Country’ to take on the jobs offered to them at the centre of the Empire, the Jamaicans did not have a warm welcome. The colonial immigrants were met with prejudice and often mistrust. They had to face discrimination in housing, racism at work and racism along with prejudice in general. Mr. Todd, Queenie’s neighbour, does not like the immigrants and believes Queenie is spoiling the neighbourhood by renting out rooms in her house to ‘darkies’. They would, according to Mr. Todd, “turn the area into a jungle” (Levy, 2004, p. 113). The people in Britain were confronted with an ethnic group that was unfamiliar to them: “Look! She’s black. Look, Mum, black woman” (ibid, p. 334). The Jamaicans were taught at school about their ‘Mother Country’ but the British people were not taught about their colonies. The Jamaicans were still seen as ‘Others’ and not a child of the country. Many, like Mr. Todd, believed the immigrants had come to Britain because of the National Health Service. Although officially the Jamaicans belonged to Britain and were UK citizens



the jobs offered to them were the less paying jobs. Even if they had certificates for better jobs, the opportunities were not given to them.

The identity crisis for Hortense does not start when she asks for condensed milk from the grocer who does not understand her accent. Nor does it start from Queenie's comment about being a visitor to this country who "should step off the pavement into the road if an English person wishes to pass and there is not sufficient room on the pavement for both of us" (Levy, 2004, p. 335). Neither when Mr. Todd's tells her how she should behave.

Hortense's identity crisis starts when she applies for a job as a teacher. For the interview, which is a very important occasion for Hortense, she wears her wedding dress. She firmly believes she will get the job because the teachers at her school in Jamaica all thought she was a "highly capable expert" (Levy, 2004, p. 449). On her way to the interview she still feels superior:

Anyone hearing Gilbert Joseph speak would know without hesitation that this man was not English. No matter that he is dressed in his best suit, his hair greased, his fingernails clean, he talked (and walked) in a rough Jamaican way. Whereas I, since arriving in this country, had determined to speak in an English manner. It was of no use to imitate the way of speaking of those about me, for too many people I encountered spoke as a Cockney would. All fine diction lost in a low-class slurring garble. No. to speak English properly as the high-class, I resolved to listen to the language at its finest ... The BBC ... on two occasions a shopkeeper had brought me the item requested without repetition from me. (ibid, pp. 449-450)



Before the interview she does not appreciate Gilbert and tells him he does not have to wait and darken the place because she can find her way back, she is an independent lady who will soon have a job, she thinks. She had planned to become a teacher long before she arrived in London.

Walking into Islington, a prestigious English school, with recommendations in her hands, she is faced with a harsh rejection as soon as the employer asks where she is from. “You can’t teach in this country. You’re not qualified to teach here in England ... It doesn’t matter that you were a teacher in Jamaica ... You will not be allowed to teach here” (Levy, 2004, p. 454) And although Hortense tries hard to not be refused by asking how long a training in England will take, the only answer she gets is a giggle and a goodbye.

“Racism and exclusion spoil millions of lives and waste the optimism and energy of people who could, and should, be building the country’s prosperous future” (Parekh, 2000, p. 10). Hortense sole purpose in life was to become an English teacher in England. She identified herself as a smart, independent teacher from an aristocratic family. With this refusal, however, she did not know who or what she was anymore. Hortense starts to scream and on her way out she kicks against a bucket only to walk into a cupboard. According to Fernandez this cleaning cupboard she walks into is a symbolic space “that denotes the working possibilities of Black people in London at the time” (Fernandez, 2010, p. 34). This particular event is as a turning point in Hortense’s very strong character. She no longer knows who she is and her identity seems to be lost in this foreign country. The country



where she always thought to belong to did not identify her and thus ultimately she goes into shock.

On her way out, Hortense feels hopeless. She has difficulties in accepting her place in the new society as the 'other'. Gilbert, who waited outside for her, tries to cheer her up by telling her not to worry and he then tells her "I can look after you" (Levy, 2004, p. 464). The always ambitious, responsible and independent Hortense cannot come to terms with the idea of being dependent on a man. She pulls her hand away from his and tells him she can sew. When Gilbert says he can find a sewing job for her she gets angry again. She finds difficulties in accepting lower jobs because she is a teacher. But Gilbert reassures her by saying "a teacher you will be even when you are sewing" (ibid, p. 464). When the sense of belonging is gone and when a culture considers itself superior to another, an individual can fall into an identity crisis. This superiority of culture is something that was used in the colonial period to educate and civilize another (inferior) culture. Thus identity crisis comes to existence when different social classes or races feel discriminated by the majority or upper class. This can lead to oppression and alienation.

## **5. Hybridity**

Levy was able to portray a changing society in London from before and after the WWII. The narrative highlights the beginning of co-existence of different races and the difficulties individuals faced because of it. The environment was not ready for such a rapid change in the society. The government, for example, did not know how to deal with the changes. The indigenous people were prejudiced mainly



because they feared the unknown. The colonized knew about the English but the English had no idea about the colonized. All this contributed to the creation of identity crisis in the individuals and these individuals “rather than asserting a space of their own in a society they are entitled to, attempt to (re)define that space as a hybrid location that is an inherent part of British contemporary society” (Fernandez, 2009, p. 144).

In the final chapters of *SI*, Levy has given an attempt at resolving conflicts of the hybrid society in London and also the identity crisis the individuals face because of racism and prejudice. The birth of Queenie and Michael’s child is a symbol of the new hybrid society of London. The child stands for the birth of a new multicultural society in a postcolonial Britain. Through their child the Black immigrants were granted a voice as well. During the pregnancy Queenie doubted whether the child should be brought up in society that will socially reject it because “who else alive was there who could protect it?” (Levy, 2004, p. 496) This shows that Levy knows that the society in 1948 was not ready to accept a child of mixed races being raised by a single, white mother. The child that symbolically stands for multiculturalism could not be denied but was still feared. The child, as multiculturalism, should be brought up without fear and prejudice in a safe environment and thus when the child is born, Queenie begs the couple Gilbert and Hortense to take the child.

Hybridity refers to a postmodern form of identity in which identity is no longer stable and uniform, but is built up from different elements, whereby these elements do not merge with each other, but coexist in a constant process of



interaction. According to Childs and Fowler (2006) hybridity refers to a postmodern form of identity in which identity is no longer stable and uniform, but is built up from different elements, whereby these elements do not merge with each other, but coexist in a constant process of interaction. Not only individuals but also, for example, nations are subject to hybridism because, due to decolonization, wars and migration, they no longer comprise one homogeneous group of people, but many different groups of people with different cultural backgrounds.

In *S/* Levy presents a solution to identity crisis by introducing social and cultural hybridity. The hybrid identity is a mix of elements from different cultures. This hybrid character was born out of Jamaican and British parents. Queenie, the metaphoric character of the 'Mother Country', is unable to be the ideal mother figure for the child. She is unable to bring the child up in a xenophobic free London and thus the child is adopted by the Black immigrants in a growing multicultural society. The culture is in transformation and the child is the start of a change in the British identity. The baby did not only bring change to the society at large but also to the individuals in a transforming society.

## **Conclusion**

Levy is a postcolonial novelist who is not afraid of highlighting the difficulties colonial immigrants have had to go through in the 'Mother Country'. Through different themes she tackles the difficulties immigrants face. The impact of racism, prejudice and non-belonging lead to an identity crisis. The writer's aim



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is to reflect upon the difficulties colonial immigrants face when they try to find their hybrid identity in the 'Mother Country'. Levy's work delivers didactic messages. The only way to create a stable and strong hybrid character or community is through the acceptance of different cultures and social norms of others.



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### پوخته

#### كيشه‌ی ناسنامه له دوورگه‌ی بچووکی ئەندریا لیفیدا

كيشه‌ی ناسنامه له و بابەتانه‌یه، كه ئەمڕۆ بەزۆری له بواری توێژینه‌وه‌كانی كۆمه‌لایه‌تی و رۆشنبیریدا گفتوگۆی له‌سەر ده‌كرێت. ناسنامه دیاردیه‌كه به‌هه‌ستکردن، به گه‌رانه‌وه و دانەپال بۆ رۆشنبیری و جفاکی پێوه‌ست به‌خۆی. كاتێك، كه ئاواره‌كان له شوێنێكه‌وه رووده‌كه‌نه شوێنێکی دی، به‌زۆری ئەم جۆره هه‌سته‌یان له‌لا په‌یداده‌بێت و كيشه‌ی ناسنامه لایان سه‌ره‌له‌ده‌دات. ئەندریا لیفی له رۆمانی دوورگه‌ی بچووكدایه‌زموونی ئه‌و په‌نابه‌رانه‌مان له‌ریگه‌ی دوو كه‌سه‌یه‌تی به‌نیوی گیلبه‌رت و هورتنس بۆ به‌رجه‌سته‌ده‌كات، له‌وكاته‌دا، كه له‌نده‌ن نیشته‌جێده‌بن و دووچاری كيشه‌ی ناسنامه ده‌بن و هه‌ست به‌وه ده‌كه‌ن، كه به‌هۆی ره‌گه‌زه‌یه‌ستی و خۆخوازی به‌باشی پێشوازییان لێ ناکرێت و هه‌ستی نامۆیی دایانده‌گرێت.

ئەم توێژینه‌وه‌یه بایه‌خ به‌ ئەزموونی په‌نابه‌ران و له‌ده‌ستدانی داوونه‌ریتی تایبه‌ت به‌خۆیان ده‌دات، كه له‌ ئەنجامدا كيشه‌ی ناسنامه‌یان لا سه‌ره‌له‌ده‌دات. هه‌روا تیشك ده‌خاته سه‌ر لیفی - نووسه‌ری رۆمانه‌كه، له‌ دارشتنی ناسنامه‌دا، كه ناسنامه‌یه‌کی تێكه‌لی به‌هێزه.

### ملخص

#### أزمة الهوية في الجزيرة الصغيرة عند أندريا ليفي

تعتبر الهوية من المواضيع الأكثر عرضاً للمناقشة في مجال البحوث الاجتماعية والثقافية اليوم. الهوية هي ظاهرة ثقافية اجتماعية ترتبط ارتباطاً وثيقاً بالشعور للانتماء وعندما ينتقل المهاجرون من مكان إلى آخر لن يراودهم هذا الشعور، وعندما يحدث هذا، فإنهم غالباً ما يخضعون لأزمة الهوية. تقدم أندريا ليفي تجربة المهاجرين في رواية الجزيرة الصغيرة من خلال التركيز على اثنين من المهاجرين وهما جيلبرت وهورتنس اللذين يستقران في لندن ويعانيان أزمة الهوية ويشعران بعدم الترحيب بهما بسبب العنصرية والتحيز، لذا ينتابهما الشعور بالغربة.



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تركز هذه الدراسة على تجارب المهاجرين وفقدانهم الشعور بالانتماء الذي يخلق في نهاية المطاف أزمة الهوية. وتسلط الدراسة الضوء أيضا على ليفي في صياغتها للهوية وذلك بخلق هويات مختلطة وقوية.