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Exploring Alienation and Identity Crisis in Andrea Levy's "Fruit of the Lemon"

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ABSTRACT

The novel "Fruit of the Lemon" by Andrea Levy is a compelling read that explores the complexity of identity and the effects of cultural heritage on a person's sense of self. This research paper examines the protagonist's battle between her Jamaican and British identities and the ensuing internal conflict in order to analyze the idea of identity crisis as it is presented in Levy's book. This study aims to offer a deeper comprehension of the protagonist's psychological anguish by examining the themes of race, heritage, and belonging. By doing so, it hopes to shed light on more general issues of cultural assimilation and the pursuit of personal identity.

Keywords: Mother Country, Discrimination, Family Dynamics, Silence, Home

The West Indian Diaspora in Britain can be connected to other diasporas around the globe, but because of the shared history of the British Empire, it is impossible to ignore the West Indies' unique relationship with Britain. Literature by West Indian authors reveals much about Caribbean identities as it does about Britain. The writers use their writing to expose the hypocrisy of the majority society and to combat prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes. As will be claimed, understanding and pride in one's cultural heritage aid in integration into British society. The notion that England is the "mother country," produced and upheld



throughout the Caribbean, is examined by *Andrea Levy*. It is essential to consider how closely the West Indians identify with Britain.

“Migration to Britain was a continuation of the same self-denial, a part of the psychological flight undertaken in the belief that residence in Britain would bestow upon them the inheritance of a Christian-Hellenic civilization, and release them, forever, from the chains of their African heritage. But discriminatory experiences in Britain led many to examine their past.” [1]

Faith Jackson, the main character in *Andrea Levy's Fruit of the Lemon*, is shown as being estranged since, starting in primary school, her parents make no intentional effort to inform her of her past or the truths about who she is. She learns of her parents' migration on a banana boat (slave ship) during the Windrush era from her classmates at the primary school: ‘Your mum and dad came on a banana boat,’ that was what the bully boys at my primary school used to say.’ [2] The alienation in this work is relative since Wade and Mildred Jackson, Faith and Carl's parents, exhibit their estrangement by trying to keep the truth from Faith and Carl. As the narrator regrets that Carl and Faith did not inherit any oral tradition from their parents, this alienation is not just in shying away from their background but also in doing away with all that use to characterize a traditional black-family relationship: “My mum and dad never talked about their lives before my brother Carl and I were born. They didn't sit us in front of the fire and tell long tells of the life in Jamaica –of palm trees and yams and playing by rivers. There was no oral tradition in our family. Most of my childhood questions were answered with, ‘That was a long time ago’ or ‘what you want to know that for.’ [3].

They occasionally claim to have forgotten, but in reality, they believe their history is too dishonourable to share with the kids. They fail to understand, however, that there cannot be a today without a yesterday. Furthermore, by keeping their past a secret from their kids, they end up doing more harm than good. In the occasion that her mother ever speaks about any of those repugnant past incidents, she sternly cautions Faith not to tell her friends about it: “Then I was told with a wagging finger not to go blabbing it about to my friends, not to repeat it to anyone.” [4] However, their parents' arrival in England is met with disappointment because they had to share a flat with ‘women of the night’ while staying in Ladbroke Grove, the home of Wade's brother, Donald. The first thing Faith's father noticed



about England was that it was "oh... very cold." [5] Mildred is hired as an orderly, whereas Wade is hired as a labourer. After living in squalor for six months in England, they realize that the misery and slavery they were escaping from in Jamaica are now what they are embracing there, and they long to go back. When they look for housing, they face prejudice and insults, often using overt slurs like "coloured not needed" and "underemployed." However, despite all of these facts, they are still willing to take any job situation England offers them since they think staying in England is still preferable to returning home. Wade and Mildred conceal and suppress their family ties, ethnic consciousness, cultural interactions, and anything else that would identify their black origin or genealogy in order to climb the English social ladder, just like any other Windrush immigrant. They have observed that, in this society that is hostile and intolerant of racial/cultural differences, their affiliation with the black community is a hindrance to prosperity in many ways.

Faith grows, without realizing her roots, such that when she leaves her home and lives in with some white acquaintances, she no longer possesses the slight cultural awareness and racial consciousness that her family had instilled in her "I was moving into a short-life, shared house with friends — two men and a woman." [6] Faith has fully attained the status of "black skin, white mask," [7] according to Fanon, as a result of a combination of her limited cultural heritage, Western education, and the influence of her White companions. Her attitude no longer reflects who she is in any way. She can now smoke, go to clubs, have comfortable male acquaintances, and avoid her family members for extended periods of time without being provoked. Faith's mind definitely operates at a different frequency than what her father was accustomed to. Faith is still unsure of who she really is and where she fits into the environment until she completes her degree in fashion and textiles; not even the fact that she took the course as the only person of colour made her wonder about her place in this hostile environment. But as things go on, she starts to doubt her personality. One of these conditions is the one involving her occupational mobility. Many aspects of her and the Western world in general are clearly defined by the minor conflict between her and Olivia. When she discovers Olivia kissing a man in the office, she is dismayed. Rather than apologizing for going beyond the norm for an office setting, she fires Faith, as if to say, 'How dare you.'



As Faith moves to secure a new position with BBC Television, it becomes increasingly clear that she does not belong where she had previously believed she did. She is discourteously informed by Mr. Henry that she cannot simply choose any seat to occupy when she wants to sit down: “But come and sit down.’ He indicated at a table which had three chairs around it. I went over and sat in a chair. ‘Not there, dear,’ Henry said. ‘That’s my seat.’ I got up and moved to the next chair. ‘Well, you could sit there but I’m sure Madam would have something to say about it.’ I moved along to the other chair and looked at Henry — there was nowhere else to go.” [8] This assumes that all social interactions, even the way people sit in an office, should take into account socioeconomic strata, hierarchy, and even colour. Faith asks the interviewer a question that is so in-depth that it seems inevitable that they will hire her. Overzealous Faith inquires of them in the following manner: ‘someone told me that you don’t like to have black people dressing. Is that right? Because you have no other black people in the department...’ [9] Mr. Williams, who previously advised her that she was overqualified for the position, now disputes the claim, so they choose to give her the job to appear to contradict her, but they reserve their prejudice and mischief for when she is subjected to it while performing her duties.

From the aforementioned, it is clear that there is only one question that characterizes every human relationship in this work: who are you? As defining as this query appears to be, it has numerous ramifications. For instance, what colour are you, etc.? This question is spoken or subtly indicated everywhere: in the street, at the office, in the church, in the school, at home, and while deciding where to live. Whether inside or outside of the home, we notice that Faith is always propelled into a contemplative thought whenever the issue of identity is raised because every other criterion, she had previously used to define herself seems to change at that moment. Wade and Mildred’s long-missing sense of ethnic identity gradually returns, illuminating them to the point where they resolve to return home. ‘Your dad and me are getting old now,’ Mum started, ‘and we feel that you and Carl are grown-up, so we can go home and...’ I’d stopped listening. Because what I meant by why, the question I wanted answering was, why Jamaica? Why is Jamaica home? [10]. Now, the racial memory we observe in them takes the form of longing and melancholy.



Mildred calls Faith to find out the circumstances of her employment as a result. Faith laments that the culture in which she operates is one of icy indifference. Everything in her immediate environment actually says that she is depressed because English culture has given her more than she can handle. She is nonetheless conflicted and unable to decipher the handwriting on the wall in spite of this. The BBC Television Costume Department's demand for Faith's service is the final straw that snaps the chain of reasoning. In actuality, she is the sole employed black employee in that sector. Her record is rather daunting, in addition to the spectacular question she poses to them during the interview; the department doesn't typically accept black applicants. She is not permitted to dress any actors for three months after being admitted to the department. Faith complains about the treatment she receives while openly admitting the inferior position of black people even in the Department of Costume at BBC Television. Her friend Lorraine and her mother both encourage her to remain brave in the face of racial prejudice. Her mother, Mildred, is already making plans for the method(s) she will use to save her daughter at this time. She tells Faith that she has three effective tools at her disposal to combat racism and take back her rightful position. Faith's wonderful upbringing, education, and solid religious tendency are Mildred's weapons.

Faith encounters racism once more as she follows Marion, her friend, home and hears Marion's father comment on her younger sister's behaviour at school. Marion's father dislikes the final performance at the ball since it was staged by a black poet, "Suddenly, as I looked up at this black poet, I became aware that the poet and me were the only black people in the room. I looked around again — it was now a room of white people." [11] Faith's eventual portrayal of complete ignorance regarding her origins identifies the origin of her identity dilemma. Even the white woman, Simon's mother, recognizes that this is bad and chastises Faith for something that neither of her parents have mentioned but which is the cause of her dilemma; 'Well, it will be wonderful for you to be able to visit. Aren't you curious to go' [12]

Racial memory appears to be the sole remedy for Faith's depression caused by being denied a part in the show since they deemed her inexperienced despite having only been employed for three months. The opportunity she has to participate demands that she dresses, not human beings, "I was then introduced to my actors. One was a big teddy bear called Alfred and the



other a gangly rag doll called Molly” [13]. This is followed by Simon’s tale of how a poor black woman was victimized at the bookstore simply because those thugs did not like her. She has a reflective thought as she mulls all of this over and comes to the conclusion that she has been lost the entire time. “Ruth was right, I thought to myself. Simon and Marion? Ruth was absolutely right. What it all comes down to in the end is black against white. It was simple. It was so simple.” [14]

Essentially, the story dramatizes the necessity of seeing beyond the present and leaving the existing location in order to recapture a larger story about the larger family lineage. Maria Helena Lima asserts something similar when she says, “It seems as if a return to the past is required for her protagonists to be able to move on.” [15] To comprehend her own identity, Faith needs to visit her past. Denial of her past is a roadblock to her own identity because of this.



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