

Confirming a Sense of Belonging: Angela's Homecoming in *Every Light in the House Burnin'*

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A black British writer Andrea Levy (1956-2019) is a literary figure of the twenty first century that cannot be dismissed. She focuses on the exploration of the racial relationship between Britain and its former colony Jamaica. In her novels, Levy, whose parents are Jamaican, deals with “the issue of belonging through her young Black Londoner protagonists having to answer to the White = English questions about their origin, identity and place in society. ...” (Lima 79)

Her first semi-autobiography novel, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994), describes the life of a Jamaican family living in London in the 1960s. The protagonist Angela, the second generation of Jamaican immigrants, retrospects her experiences by telling her past back and forth between her childhood and her coming of age. Throughout the story, readers can see that Angela, who feels inferiority about having Jamaican origin, realizes the importance of the family bondage in the process of recalling her childhood, the time when she has to face racial discriminations by her friends and classmates, and in her early twenties when she defies the racism through the terminal-care of her ill father, Winston, with her mother, Beryl.

In the previous studies, Jo Pready discusses that *Every Light in the House Burnin'* “develops through layered narrative techniques, which constantly switch between time and place, memory and future hopes, until each character is unsure of who they are and where they belong” (27). Michel Perfect points out that Angela's narrative tells readers the importance of remembering one's past, and it reflects the understanding of the present. Furthermore, Charlotte Beyer insists that this novel plays an important role in making aging black people, who are both silenced and marginalized, visible by giving the significance of intergenerational connections. Although these analyses are interdisciplinary and unique in themselves, there is still room to reconsider “systematic racism” (Lima 56) ingrained in British society as well as Angela's Englishness. The purpose of this paper is to clarify how racial prejudice and discrimination lurk in this novel, and how Angela deals with her unstable identity through the relationship with her parents.

Dad and Mom: Find Their Spaces

My dad was from Jamaica - born and bred. He came to this country in 1948 on the *Empire Windrush* ship. My mum joined him six months later in his one room in Earl's Court. (Levy 3)

Winston and Beryl are Jamaican immigrants who live in north London, England. They sailed to the "Mother country" in order to seek better opportunity.

Historically, since England suffered from a labour shortage after World War II, the nation targeted workers from the West Indies to meet the demand in the labour market. The first wave of Jamaican immigrants arrived at Tilbury on the *Empire Windrush* ship in 1948. Although they economically expected a better quality of life, they ended up taking the place of English people who had abandoned their low-paid occupations (Makiguchi 1-3). Winston and Beryl are also severely restricted in their choices of jobs because they are non-English, and considered secondary citizens.

As Angela explains of his father "He seemed only to exist in one plane of time – the present" (3), Winston is a mysterious person in many ways. For instance, he strangely avoids revealing his name in public and telling his children about his life in Jamaica. And it is never explained why. His enigmatic attitude signifies that he suffers from a complex about Jamaica, and that he tries to blot his past out and to establish his new identity so that he can assimilate into British society. Simultaneously, Winston sticks to his way of living. He dresses in the same kind of suit every single day while other fathers wear jeans and open-necked shirts. For him, the definition of British gentleman contains a male with formal wear, dressing in suits, with a hat and a tie. Moreover, an old photo of Winston that "shows him dressed in an immaculate tailored suit with wide baggy trousers, wearing a shirt with a collar held by a pin, and a proper tie" (3) implies that he sticks to his stereotypical ideal of British gentleman style since he was in Jamaica.

Similarly, Beryl, who was a teacher of young children in Jamaica, shows her desire of assimilation into British society by, for instance, speaking in a traditional British accent, but at the same time she persists in what she wants to do. She wants to continue her job in Britain, but a Jamaican teaching qualification is not approved in England. Nevertheless, she never reconciles herself to the situation where she is alienated on the ground of her race, and achieves the qualification after an effort of "three years of washing, cooking, college, feeding, homework, bed, washing, cooking, feeding, homework, bed" (9). Her effort describes her strong determination not only to become a teacher again, but also to obtain the same career status and opportunities as local people. Heather Horst delivered an interview to Jamaicans who are living in England, and their answers clarify how severe the conditions are for immigrants attempting to integrate into society:

As they [Jamaicans] entered the workforce, interacted with working class whites, attempted to find housing and encountered an increasingly conservative political climate, they very quickly learned that they did not belong and certainly were not considered English. (Horst 14)

This quotation elucidates that Jamaicans recognize themselves as “immigrants” for the first time when they came to England. They would never be aware of being “outsiders” if they remained in Jamaica. As for this novel, Winston and Beryl manage to adapt their lifestyle to British society even though they notice its difficulty. Simultaneously, they do what they want to do. While Winston and Beryl find ways of being themselves respectively, their daughter Angela struggles to find her sense of belonging in the society in different ways from her parents.

Angela: Adherence to Englishness

British-born Angela struggles with her embarrassment of having Jamaican parents, so that she deliberately maintains a certain distance toward her parents. Angela remembers when her mother takes her to the beauty parlor, where only black women visit. Angela, twelve years old at that time, observes as follows:

Everyone in the salon was black and female. I had never been in the company of so many black people before. People from the Caribbean like my mum and dad, only ‘real’ black people with dark brown skin. . . . I felt pale in this company, out of place, as white here as I felt black among the pasty-faced English. My mum looked fair and white but her broad African features and Jamaican accent let you know she was among kin. (203)

In this quotation, Angela defines “‘real’ black people” including her parents as those who have either dark brown skin or African accent, or both. Angela reassures her Britishness by emphasizing how she is a different race from her parents. She has already noticed that she does not fit in the white community, but she also feels out of place herself as one of the “real” black people. Angela manages to gain priority than other black people by making subcategories within “Blackness” such as pale black, middle black, and dark black, namely, Angela is quite sensitive to racial differences more than anyone else.

Angela continues to compare her with others until her coming of age. In chapter six, Angela firmly believes that she knows British society better than her parents whose strategy, from her point of view, is “to keep as quiet as possible in the hope that no one would know that they had sneaked into this country” (106-7). It is obvious that Angela feels both advantage and privilege of being native British. Even when she is willing to take care of her terminally-ill father, she tends to separate her from her parents in order to

confirm her own Englishness.

What is worth noting here is that Angela often juxtaposes herself with others, judging whether she is superior or not by maintaining her Englishness. Such her attitude results from her deep anxieties about precariousness of her racial identity, and she tries to reassure it by comparing her with others. Chukwumezie addresses that Faith, the protagonist in Levy's another novel called *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), also suffers from a sense of not belonging. Faith is recognized as one of the minorities although she sees herself is not. According to him, Faith "understands that her society perceives a lighter-skinned person, not withstanding that the person may be of black ancestry, superior to a dark-complexioned person, she begins to act in line with that perception. . ." (11). A common point between these two protagonists is that their identity crisis and dislocation are strongly affected by the racial boundaries and hierarchy. This is a part of what Levy tries to present through her novels. This paper will discuss how the racial crisis of Angela occurs in the following section.

Alienation and Identity Crisis

Angela's racial crisis is gradually accumulated in the relationship with people around her. In chapter THE FRIEND, Angela retrospects her childhood when her friend Sonia denies the meal that Beryl served, and Sonia's mother persistently asks Angela what she usually eats at her home:

Sonia's mum laughed then said, 'She [Sonia] said it was so hot it nearly blew her head off.' She laughed and so did Sonia. . . .

'Is that what you eat all the time?' Sonia's mum asked me.

'Not all the time,' I said.

'What else d'you eat then?' she persisted.

'Other things,' I said.

'Like what?'

I thought. 'Sausages and that.'

'Ordinary sausages or special jungle sausages?' . . . 'No – what else do you eat?'

'I can't remember,' I said.

'Can't remember what you eat – that's daft! Sonia can remember what she eats, can't you chuck?'

Sonia nodded. 'I eat normal food,' she said.

'So do we,' I said. 'Most of the time.' (55-56)

Sonia's mother sarcastically and persistently attacks Angela by asking what Angela does not want to be asked. Her covertly insulting question whether Angela eats "ordinary

sausages" or "special jungle sausages" implies her embedded racial prejudice against the Jacobs. She insinuates savage by the use of "jungle", the word to brand black people, whereas "ordinary" and "normal" are something which generalizes white people. On the contrary, Angela tries to finish up the conversation by giving evasive answers such as "other things" and "I can't remember". She does not want to admit the difference in domestic meals between her family and white families, although she has already noticed it. Also, Angela blames Beryl for her being teased by Sonia and Sonia's mother. She wishes her mother would cook not Jamaican dishes like boiled rice in coconut with beans, spiced chicken, and fried bananas, but British dishes such as "fried up sausages and chips with Oxo gravy poured over the top like Sonia had at her home" (53-54). Here, Angela compares Sonia's family with hers, frustrated with the gap between her ideal and the reality, and wishing the life style of Sonia's family at the same time.

Angela's identity crisis also arises in the situation where she and her brother, John, get to quarrel with their neighbor friends while they are playing baseball, and Angela and John end up being called discriminatory words such as "nig-nog", "wog", and "blackie" from their friends. Especially, Steven, one of them who has lost his temper, says to the siblings what he has learned from his father's remark: "You're not English. . . . you come to over with all other coons. . . . go back to where you came from - Blackie" (68). Even though Steven is a friend, he humiliates them in order to assure his superiority when they have a clash. Moreover, Steven simply uses his father's words which include "coons", an derogatory word for black people, and then he translates it into his own word "blackie" . The relation between Steven and his father reflects the bad influences that parents give their children due to their embedded beliefs, namely, the vicious circle of the racial prejudice underpinned by one generation is passed on to following generations.

Readers can see a kind of racial prejudice and discrimination depicted in the work, that is, Sonia, Sonia's mother, and Steven's humiliation of Angela clearly shows a racial hierarchy. Angela is usually surrounded by those who insensitively make minorities believe that they are inferior to white English people. Because of these experiences in her childhood, Angela is increasingly frustrated with not being recognized as native British, even though she has pride of her British birth and British ways. The white English children do not need to be concerned about where they belong, whereas young Caribbean people have to carve out their space in the society. Angela, therefore, seeks to heal her deep anxieties and instability by convincing herself that she is different from her parents and 'real' black people. However, Angela does not keep sticking to her English identity, she eventually tries to reconstruct her relationship with her parents.

Angela's Change

Angela's attitude has slowly changed since she comes to learn that Winston has got lung cancer. She is displeased with a district nurse called Sister Blackwell who assesses Angela and talks to her with looking down on the board. Even though the nurse does not explicitly express her racism, her businesslike and unemotional behavior toward Angela and Winston shows Angela that she judges people based on their skin color, and that she sees Angela not as daughter of Winston but as someone who just knows him. Considerate of Winston, Angela inwardly claims that she is "the daughter of that dying man" (133). Here, her reversed feeling for public recognition strongly asserts their blood relations.

Angela's anger escalates when she talks to Sister Tooke who calls Winston "Old man Jacobs" and treats him as if he is troublesome (187). Angela is infuriated with the insensitive nurse, complaining that she does not respect Winston's dignity at all. Such fury as hers is derived from her love for her father which is hardly expressed before.

Since Angela does not demonstrate her dissatisfaction with and rage toward the two women but just keeps them in mind, it is easy to say that she is still embarrassed with her Jamaican parents. However, it is significant that having strong feelings for Winston leads Angela to a small step forward accepting her identity as a native English born to Jamaican parents, and figuring out a sense of belonging in British society. Angela, who used to ignore her racial roots, tries to face her kinship and to be mentally close to her father. The distance Angela takes from Winston is in proportion to her disapproval of her racial identity. In other words, she is gradually able to accept not only her parents but also herself in the process of caring for Winston with Beryl. Angela's emotional growth also appears through her narrative. When Angela reminisces about her childhood, she seldom reveals her emotions, but she gradually begins to express her feelings as she grows up, as her terminally-ill father is dying, and as the story goes toward the end. In chapter twenty, when her narrative is closing down, Angela attempts to kiss her father who is in tears, but her hesitation prevents her from doing so. It is remarkable that not only Angela is willingly accepting her racial roots but also wants physical contact with her father. Even though she still cannot take action, her wish confirms Angela's love for Winston.

Another point to note is that the two nurses who neglect of Angela and Winston imply another kind of racial prejudice and discrimination which is hidden in the novel. Although there is no reference to why the two women disregard the Jacobs, their insensitiveness and carelessness reflect their racial prejudice on an unconscious level. Even if they do not intend to do so, their attitude is a racist one for Angela.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the two kinds of racial prejudice and discrimination depicted in *Every Light in the House Burnin'*: one clearly shows us racial hierarchy, which white English people always are in the highest position, the other is one unconsciously but explicitly hurts minority groups.

Under these circumstances, Angela, who is embarrassed to be the second generation of Jamaican immigrants, tends to compare her to others, the comparison which is based on her deep anxieties about her racial identity. Especially, the reason why she does not see her parents as homogeneity is because she refuses to accept her identity. Such is her dislocation of her identity resulting from the society she lives in, where minorities always have to deal with the assumption that something "usual" and "normal" is equated with white English people, and moreover, minorities are forced to accept their inferiority. When Angela is a child, she is one who struggles with systematic racism. However, Angela compromises her complicated identity and manages to reconstruct her relationship with her parents. The more she spends time caring for Winston, the more she reveals her feelings for him although she keeps them in mind. This is her step forward to be able to accept herself as well as her parents having Jamaican backgrounds. Beyer mentions that "*Every Light in the House Burnin'* uses the idea of 'light' to interrogate issues of (in) visibility in relation to gender, race, and to voice the unspoken" (108). In addition to his interpretation of the title, it can be also analyzed that 'light' refers to the warmth, vitality and perseverance of the Angela's family. Angela cares about only herself, that is, believing it is only Angela's light that is burning in the house. With this awareness, she becomes less and less egocentric and finally comes to terms with reevaluating her family.

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