

Small Island (2004) written by Andrea Levy (1956-2019) is her fourth work which has been highly praised in England. Her earlier three works are semi-autobiographical coming of age novels, but *Small Island* for the first time offers both white and black British who experience a crucial period in England's history, the moment when the subjects of the Empire immigrated to their Mother country. Levy unfolds a multilayered story by moving back and forth between "1948", the period when the *Empire Windrush* ship arrived in England, and "Before", the decades up to and including the Second World War, from four perspectives: those of Hortense, Gilbert, Queenie and Bernard. Hortense who has ambition of teaching in England immigrates there following her husband, Gilbert, who once was a volunteer the British RAF (Royal Air Force) during the Second World War and returns to England for better opportunities. They live in a house owned by Queenie who has been in London since she married Bernard who had flown to India as an RAF troop soon after their marriage.

Critical attention tends to focus on the issues of Imperialism and Identity crisis in the stories narrated from the perspectives of immigrants Gilbert and Hortense. For instance, Sharma Swarnita discusses that "*Small Island* highlights the effacement of subjectivity in Britain as a continuation of the dehumanizing dynamics of the colonial era. The West Indian remains outside English community: to be outside is to be made to feel outside humanity itself" (Sharma 51). Similarly, Marquia Claudes argues that Levy addresses the problems of "a counter-imperial inscription of black British history and identity formation [...] reaching back to the Caribbean's traumatic foundation" (Marquis 32). Moreover, BBC drama *Small Island* which was broadcasted in 2009, also focused on the stories of immigrants, mainly that of Hortense. These studies and the drama are highly significant to reveal the hidden side of British post-colonial history, but in addition to them, there is still some room left to analyze the lives of British citizens such as Queenie and Bernard. This paper focuses on Queenie, one of the main protagonists in this work, and sees what she struggles with as a woman, as a

British, and as a mother behind her difficult decision to leave her black baby and to restart her life with her husband towards the end of the story.

Queenie Bligh is an exception from the mainstream of exclusive English people in the novel. Queenie is not a woman who strongly protests some inequalities embedded in the English society, but she always struggles with contradictory consciousness: while she wants to resist domestic and racial ideology, she is afraid of being excluded from the norm of the white-centered society.

Queenie is the only girl in the Buxtons who runs a butcher shop in Lincolnshire. Her father Wilfred wants boys so that he is able to get help and successors to his business. In the male-centered family, Queenie is required to take care of her father and brothers every day. However, she succeeds in escaping her daily life as a “skivvy (201)” by marrying Bernard, the typical middle-class English man who works for a bank. His declaration “I don’t want my wife to go out to work (217)” in their wedding confetti implies that he shares the Victorian male idea of respectability to keep his wife in the household as “Angel in the House.” Queenie willingly accepts him because she could be successful in upgrading her status to the middle-class life. This marriage means for her the best opportunity to not only secure her financial future, but also allow her to move up the social ladder from a skivvy to a middle-class leisured housewife. In this sense, Queenie seemingly takes advantage of the marriage in order to upgrade her position in society. However, she sometimes reveals her desire for being free from his ‘typical’ conjugal obligations. When London has been attacked by the Germans since the onset of WWII, Queenie imprudently feels that “the raid was the most exciting thing that had ever happened in this house. [...] I was looking forward to this war” (221). Here, it reveals her strong desire for a “change” and frustration for “motivation” in her life as a housewife. Queenie finds pleasure in changing her dull life by an external factor, which is, ironically, the war. Although both marriage to Bernard and being a housewife enables her to escape from her past skivvy life, it comes to gradually oppress her instead. And this is closely related to the culture ingrained in the middle-class that Bernard belongs to. Chitose Ikawa indicates that the identity of the middle class in England depends on their domestic ideology: while husbands should go out to earn money, wives should dedicate their time to do unpaid

labor, housework. (Ikawa 28) In particular, bank clerks such as Bernard are located in the lower-middle class as “white collar”. In its culture, Ikawa continues, having “gentleness” and “respectability” are significant, and especially male clerks strongly stick to their gentleness because they are afraid of being part of the working class. In this way, the patriarchy of the middle classes – especially in the lower middle class where people also have a strong sense of belonging to the middle class in order to distinguish themselves from those of the working class – nourishes Bernard’s social concept of masculinity. He wants to domesticate Queenie to be his ideal housewife in order to maintain his gentleness, respectability and masculinity.

Under these circumstances, however, Queenie keeps attempting to change her life. Here, it is notable that she does not merely keep her rebellious will to herself, but she puts it into action. Queenie reunites Gilbert who used to be in the RAF (Royal Air Force) and returned to England as a civilian. They had friendship in the wartime, and Queenie allows him to rent a vacant room so that she can earn money so she could live independently:

I was still young and I had a life to get on with. But I wasn’t ready for that. So when Gilbert turned up at my door I thought, I’ve got the room and I need the money. I took him in because I knew Bernard would never have let me. And if Bernard had something to say about it he’d have to come back to say it to my face. (97)

This quotation indicates that Queenie attempts to be financially independent by inviting an immigrant, Gilbert, in the house. This invitation would be her challenge because she knows that her husband will never allow her to be the host of his house. She is so deeply aware of her secondary position in the house to Bernard that she has no right to organize the house in his absence. In other words, his absence gives her a chance to make a decision on her own life. Her decision is connected to her resistance to him. In this way, she finds a new way of her life, a life where Bernard cannot observe her.

Not only Bernard’s unexpected return brings Queenie back to being a housewife again, but he also sees her living together with Gilbert and Hortense in his house, he feels that he is “hard to believe this had been my

home for most of my life. Nothing was familiar” (353). He is terribly shocked not only that the immigrants live in his house, but also that his wife rents his home to them without any notification. Since Bernard cannot face this reality, he forcibly decides to let the lodgers find “somewhere more suitable for their type [...]” (360) in order to take Queenie to the suburbs with him. With his egoistic decision, Queenie feels “being smothered (361)”. Here, her reaction implies her desperation because of the imminent loss of her financial and social independence. Queenie once gets her freedom while Bernard is not present, but her attempt fails as soon as Bernard’s return. Moreover, Bernard’s attitude shows that he is a typical racist. He neither wish to integrate with racial “others” nor accept them to entering his realm. The white supremacy which is embedded in Bernard and his neighbor Mr Todd are another element that oppresses Queenie throughout this novel. Here again, she struggles with dilemma: although she tries to confront her racist neighbors and Bernard, she is afraid of being excluded from the norm of white-centered community.

It is important to point out that Queenie is one of those who held racial prejudice towards black people during her childhood. The little Queenie meets an African man for the first time at the Empire Exhibition which is “a popular celebration of Britain’s global achievement” (Lima 77). Queenie is firstly terrified at the African man as if he is a creature that she is quite unfamiliar with. She figuratively and exaggeratedly depicts him a “monkey man” and “they [the African man’s lips] bulged with air like bicycle tyres. His hair was woolly as a black shorn sheep. His nose, squashed flat, had two nostrils big as train tunnels (5)”. Her usage of the animals, “monkey” and “black shorn sheep” clearly refers to Black people with the degrading images of “savage” and “non-civilized”. The stereotypical representation of them represents Queenie being imbued with racial ideology. As a historical background, the belief that non-Europeans are inferior to Europeans has spread among English citizens by means of some media such as historical textbooks and magazines (Kibata 5-6). It involved even children, such as Queenie, who were so vulnerable that they regarded racist attitudes as fixed ideas in the society. With this fact, there is no doubt that little Queenie has racial prejudice against the African man. However, she becomes interested in him turning her face “crimson (5)” while he is watching and smiling at her. Here, she emphasizes his “perfect set of pure blinding white teeth” and

his “clear English (5)”. This is the points where she cracks her fixed stereotypical images of black people because she never thought that they had these points. This experience of the first interaction with the African man a starting point for her to come accept interracial relationships in her life.

Queenie is fascinated by a Jamaican soldier Michael, whose “picture-house smiles (241)” are reminiscent of the African man in the Empire Exhibition. Queenie blushes again, but this time, she flirts with him and fixes her appearance curling her hair and pinching her cheeks pink, an appearance for which she has not paid any attention in her relationship with Bernard. Although her gesture of doing up the button of her dress implies her attempt to hide her sexual desire towards Michael, she cannot control it during a sexual intercourse with him:

It wasn't me. Mrs Queenie Bligh, she wasn't even there. This woman was a beauty. – he couldn't get enough of her. He liked the downy softness of the blonde hairs on her legs. Her nipples were the pinkest he'd ever seen. Her throat – he just had to kiss her throat. This woman was as sexy as any starlet on a silver screen. The zebra of their legs twined and untwined together on the bed. Her hands, pale as a ghost's, caressed every part of his nut-brown skin. She was so desirable he polished her with hot breath – his tongue lapping between her legs like a cat with cream. It wasn't me. This woman watching his buttocks rise and fall sucked at every finger on his hand. She clawed his back and cried out until his mouth lowering down filled hers with his eager tongue. It wasn't me. This woman panted and thrust and bit. And when he rolled her over she yelped wickedly into the pillow. Mrs Queenie Bligh would never do such a thing. That one, Mrs Bligh, usually worked out what she could make for dinner during sexual relations with her husband. But this woman, if it hadn't been for the blackout, could have lit up London. (248)

In this quotation, two aspects of Queenie are evident: one is a Queenie who enjoys intense sexual fulfillment, the other is a Queenie who is reluctant to accept sexual excitement. It is clear that Queenie reveals her sexual desires for Michael an orgasm which she has never experienced before. “The zebra of their legs”, Queenie remembers, “twined and untwined together on the bed” represents the harmony of their skin colours. “Together” illuminates that

they equally enjoy having their interaction. In this way, Queenie shows her sexuality openly in a new way. She is willing to seek sexual pleasures with Michael. Her passion is intensified to a degree that she “lit up London”. On the other hand, the sexual intercourse between Queenie and Bernard is unilateral. She keeps telling his acts such as “He’d kissed me” and “The he’d rolled himself on top of me” (215). Queenie seems to be passive in their love making. For her, sex with her husband is not a physical confirmation of their love, but merely a ritualistic procedure of conceiving his baby. Simultaneously, there is another aspect of Queenie, which appears in her narrative. In her narrative of the sexual highlight, she retains a certain distance from being active herself by using the third person’s noun such as “it wasn’t me”, “Mrs Bligh”, and “this woman” over and over. It means that she still cannot fully face the other side of herself, the one who is full of sexual desire, because she has never appreciated the sensation. In this way, the relationship with Michael fills Queenie with pleasure although all the more with the social taboo of having an interracial relationship at that time.

The sexual fulfillment brings Queenie unexpected pregnancy. Here, she struggles with contrasting consciousness. While she wants to protect her baby from her racist neighbors, Mr Todd and his sister, she firstly tries to abort it in order to escape their “prying eyes” (411). This state of mind implies that she is more likely to protect herself rather than her child. Queenie seemingly pretends not to care about what neighbors say, but in fact it reveals her fear of being excluded from the norm of the Euro-centric society. Thus, she inwardly tries to assimilate herself into it. This indicates that she has not yet completely got rid of herself of her whiteness embedded within her. Such struggle lasts until the end of the novel.

The twist of the ending, where Queenie kneels down to beg Gilbert and Hortense to take care of her child called Michael, is worth examining for its portrayal of how hard Queenie resists the norms of white male supreme society. She discloses all of her feelings, which are related at length. The following quotation especially exposes her mind:

Bernard. One day he [Michael]’ll do something naughty and you’ll look at him and think, the little black bastard, because you’ll be angry. And he’ll see it in your eyes. You’ll be angry with him not only for that. But because the neighbors never invited you round. Because they

whispered about you as you went by. Because they never thought you were as good as them. Because they thought you and your family were odd. And all because you had a coloured child.' He was going to say something else. Opened his mouth but nothing came out. 'It would kill you, Bernard,' I said. 'Have you thought about all that? Because I have. I've done nothing but think about it. And you know what? I haven't got the guts for it. I thought I would. I should have but I haven't got the spine. Not for that fight. I admit it, I can't face it, and I'm his blessed mother.' (431-32)

This quotation illustrates that Queenie strongly points out to Bernard how deeply racial ideology is imbedded in himself. She emphasizes that when he makes a decision to take care of a brown baby in a white-centered community, he has to make up his mind to be excluded from the community. However, it cannot be dismissed that Queenie herself struggles to oppose the white supremacy in the society, while she well understands that she has to appreciate it. She clearly confesses that she does not have "the guts" and "the spine", which bring her strength to conflict with herself. It seems that this is a message which is conveyed not only to Bernard but also to herself. Racial ideology is so deeply imbedded in Queenie that she cannot escape from it, even though she wants to take care of her child.

This paper focuses on Queenie who makes two decisions: one is to leave her black child, and the other one is to go back to her husband. Behind her choice, mainly two social functions affect her. Firstly, the patriarchal system rooted in middle-class forcibly deprives housewives' opportunities to get social and financial independence. Secondly, racial discrimination is so deeply embedded in white English citizens that the people such as Queenie who do not fit in the mainstream have a risk to be marginalized from the majority. Queenie attempts to resist against these two dominant beliefs, she is afraid of being excluded from the mainstream of the white society.

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