

Examining Cultural Hybridity in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

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Abstract

The novel *Small Island* by Andrea Levy, has been extensively analysed through the lens of postcolonial literature and culture. However, this article delves into complexities that transcend a post colonialist viewpoint, questioning labels such as insiders and outsiders, present an alternative narrative about Britain. The novel illustrates the diverse ways of individuals from different ethnic backgrounds, shared stories, and interpret their multicultural experiences. In doing so, the concepts of how they challenge a singular notion of British identity, celebrate cultural hybridity, and provide a dynamic depiction of contemporary British society are discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Cultural hybridity, Multicultural experiences, British identity, Insiders and outsiders, Contemporary British society.

Following the World War II and the end of colonization, the British Empire experience a dramatic collapse. It is simplest to answer the 'when' question. Everyone is aware that the 1939 -1945 war caused the Empire to fall quickly said McIntyre (11). Andrea Levy's novel *Small Island* is set in London. Ghanaian poet Kwame Dawes states that the role of immigrant writers is to question the idea that they are not at ease whenever they are in

England, and Levy is among the Black writers who have established a new Black British voice in Britain (Dawes 261). The novel provides insightful observations on the experiences of the Jamaican protagonists living in London in 1948. It demonstrates that there was a significant shift in the discourse around migration following World War II.

However, the issues Andrea Levy addresses extend beyond postcolonial logic. It initially questions the concepts of insiders and outsiders. Levy's literary work is distinct from the postcolonial tradition because it is deeply embedded in British society, reflecting her British heritage. Her novels offer a critical perspective on British society, aiming to redefine it as a hybrid space that is integral to contemporary British culture, rather than merely claiming a space for herself within a society to which she belongs. This sets her work apart from that of early Black and Asian authors.

Despite chronological limitations that feature only first-generation characters compelled by historical events to live in an increasingly multiethnic society, Levy portrays first- and second-generation immigrants in Britain as those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves a new, through transformation and difference (Hall 235). This fluid and diverse identity contrasts with rigid and homogeneous notions of belonging.

Levy's themes of non-belonging and belonging not only characterize her novels but also influence how her work is critically categorized. Both readers and critics recognize *Small Island* by Andrea Levy as part of the modern British literary canon. Her novels have received prominent literary awards in the UK. However, due to her diverse ethnic background, some categorize her writing as "Black British Literature" (Sesay), while others include it in general anthologies of "British Literature" (Acheson and Ross).

When authors resist having their work categorized within a specific literary tradition, the debates around classification and labelling become even more intricate. Andrea Levy

openly acknowledges that her work is Black British and embraces this definition. She admits that she writes about the experiences of a segment of the British population that has been historically silenced, as she readily admits (Allardice; Greer). In an interview with María Helena Lima, Levy shared that her motivation to write stemmed from a desire to uncover the forgotten history of Black immigrants in Britain, that the starting point of writing books has always been about wanting to make the unseen visible, wanting to show the experience of her parents' generation and the children that came after, to live in Britain, quite a hostile environment, and how they cope with that (Lima 57).

A crucial step in redefining Britishness has been the integration of writings by authors from diverse ethnic backgrounds into mainstream British literature. Sarah Lawson Welsh noted in 1997 that the growing visibility of their own creative and experiential mappings of nation, of the complex state of (un)belonging in Britain, has been central to undermining notions of a fixed, unchanging construction of nation as well as problematizing and unsettling received versions of Britishness (52). The acclaim Andrea Levy's *Small Island* received from critics, as Hall's literature of the third scenario (Bastida 150), underscores this shift.

Levy's writing, rooted in her British identity, offers a multifaceted sense of belonging rather than a uniform one. Set in cosmopolitan London, her characters navigate and problematize their spaces and relationships within the country. This aligns with feminist geographer Doreen Massey's theories, viewing space as both a geographical location and a network of social relations. Such a perspective enriches the study of literary depictions of diverse environments in modern multicultural society, where spaces are constantly negotiated and transformed.

Small Island is set the backdrop of post-World War II Britain. It contrasts the lives of two couples: Hortense and Gilbert, Black Jamaicans, and Queenie and Bernard, White

Britons. While focusing on these specific stories, the novel also generalizes the experiences of Black British subjects and British citizens during this period. The late 1940s and early 1950s saw significant migration to the UK by individuals influenced by British colonial education or participation in the war effort. Gilbert and Hortense, two Windrush immigrants, are the protagonists of the novel, who follows their lives in Britain. In Britain, they encounter individuals like Queenie and Bernard, and, it appears, all of England who are unable to comprehend or accept them. The novel addresses difficult topics like violence and racial prejudice while also finding humor and optimism in small acts of kindness and good fortune. *Small Island* portrays a mother country initially unwelcoming to immigrants, highlighting the tension between Black and White populations. This is exemplified by Queenie's neighbour Mr. Todd's derogatory remarks about immigrants that they would turn the area into a jungle (Levy 113).

Levy's narrative aligns with the postcolonial tradition, akin to early works by Caribbean migrants like Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). However, *Small Island* delves deeper into the necessity for all British society members to reconsider their sense of belonging and adapt, marking a pivotal moment in British history and heralding the emergence of a multicultural society.

Characters in *Small Island* redefine their identities and spaces in light of new circumstances. Hortense and Gilbert reimagine the mother country and navigate their new reality post-migration. Queenie face wartime challenges alone, and Bernard come to terms with Black people living in London. These transformative experiences mark a turning point in their lives, as Queenie poignantly explains that "There are some words that once spoken will split the world in two. There would be the life before you breathed them and then the altered life after they had been said. They take a long time to find, words like that. They make

you hesitate. Choose with care. Hold on to them unspoken for as long as you can just so your world will stay intact” (Levy 491).

The way these characters interact demonstrates how cultural identities are flexible. The interactions Gilbert and Hortense had with Queenie and Bernard highlight the difficulties of cross-cultural communication and the influence of interpersonal bonds on cross-cultural understanding. The book highlights the changes that must be made on both a personal and societal level by illustrating the challenges and compromises that come with creating a hybrid identity. The protagonists’ home is a microcosm of post-war Britain, representing the blending and colliding of various cultures. It develops into an area where various identities cohabit, communicate, and have an impact on one another; this reflects the novel’s larger topic of cultural hybridity. In *Small Island*, Andrea Levy skillfully uses her characters’ experiences to illustrate the complex nature of cultural hybridity. The novel examines how people from various backgrounds negotiate their identities, adjust to new circumstances, and participate in a multicultural, dynamic society.

Small Island offers a vibrant portrayal of modern British culture by embracing cultural hybridity. The term “cultural hybridity” describes the combining and blending of many cultural influences to create new, hybrid identities. The protagonists in Levy’s works are prime examples of this hybridity, fusing their experiences in Britain with their cultural background. This celebration of hybridity highlights how identities in heterogeneous societies are dynamic and ever-changing. The study explores how these personalities subvert the conventional, monolithic idea of British identity in the process. The novel presents Britishness as varied and multidimensional, challenging the notion that it is a static and homogenous concept. The contributions of numerous ethnic groups and the intricately linked past that have shaped modern-day Britain are recognized in this reinterpretation of British identity.

By presenting the protagonists' real-life experiences, the book also offers a lively portrayal of modern British culture. Their hardships, victories, and day-to-day encounters are a reflection of the larger cultural movements towards increased inclusivity and diversity. *Small Island* challenges readers to reevaluate what it means to be British in a multicultural and dynamic world through its story.

To conclude as the Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that the separation of birth and nation concepts leads to “the problem of identity,” making it a contemporary issue (24). But the authors like Andrea Levy, with their ethnically diverse backgrounds, address the everyday struggles of hybrid individuals and reshape social spaces to recognize their British hybrid identity through literature. *Small Island* illustrates the dynamic and fluid nature of social spaces, continually negotiated and transformed. As Keith and Pile noted that the metaphoric and the real do not belong in separate worlds; if the symbolic and the literal are in part constitutive of one another (23). Thus, in line with Henri Lefebvre's thesis on *The Production of Space* (2005), Levy provides alternative representational spaces through her literary works, helping to transform social settings and their associated meanings. Thus the studied novel embodies diverse British identities and approaches to inhabiting a hybrid space in contemporary Britain.

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