

ENTERTEXT

Representations of Ageing and Black British Identity in Andrea Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and Joan Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight*

Author: Charlotte Beyer

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Abstract

The article focuses on representations of ageing and black British identity in Andrea Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) and Joan Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight* (1987). Offering a comparative analysis of representations of ageing experiences for the first Windrush generation, I explore areas of these two texts that have received relatively little attention from critics. Specifically focusing on representations of ageing and the body, and on uses of memory in story-telling, the article examines the use of memory writing in the novels, suggesting this discourse as a subjective means by which individuals may (re)connect with and recast their personal and collective histories of race, class, and gender marginalisation. I examine the ways in which Levy and Riley's novels document the voices and life stories of ageing black British men and women, using a fictional form, thereby creating spaces for those hitherto marginalised accounts and characters in contemporary British fiction. The article furthermore analyses Levy and Riley's portrayals of ageing characters, their relationship to families and communities, and their exhausting and difficult struggle to reject victimisation whilst retaining subjective agency and personal dignity. In their representations of ageing and the body, Levy and Riley explore the impact of illness, isolation, loss of social status, and the treatment of elderly black British individuals by the health system and local communities. In conclusion, both novels reject the story of silenced victimhood for their ageing characters by foregrounding

“Or perhaps I should describe the old, wild-haired man”¹: Representations of Ageing and Black British Identity in Andrea Levy’s *Every Light in the House*

“Mapping Memories: Reminiscence with Ethnic Minority Elders.”¹⁰ These projects focus on personal histories and the uncovering of the past, employing the very kind of narrative techniques used by Levy and Riley in their fictions.

Both Levy’s *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and Riley’s *Waiting in the Twilight* explore and retrieve black British individual and collective histories using a fictional form. I want to begin my analysis by examining the narrative techniques and formal processes that Levy and Riley employ in order to express the black British collective experience through the lens of the individual, particularly through the use of memory writing and a daughter-mediator character. These aspects of Levy’s writing (and, I would argue, also of Riley’s) “have not been addressed; in particular, its formal intricacies and its treatment of historical silences have not received adequate attention” from critics.¹¹ This essay explores such formal intricacies by looking at Levy and Riley’s recasting of individual histories through narratives of ageing: stories which use subjective and partial memory writing as formal processes to access those past experiences and emotions which do not otherwise ‘translate.’

According to Cesar and Sharon Meraz, black British women writers have taken on the task of representing the “reality of aging for the West Indian immigrant in London [...] and experiences of ‘displacement and disconnection.’”¹² This is long overdue, as Maria Helena Lima argues, “it used to be that to be Black and British was to be unnamed in the official discourse.”¹³ Similarly invisible in literature is the issue of old age, Hepworth concludes: “Old age has been described as the ultimate challenge for the novelist because it is about people who are living through the final period of their lives.”¹⁴ Representations of old age add nuance and complexity to conventional novelistic plots constructed around individuation and life journey, such as in the *Bildungsroman*, the developmental narrative model which, according to Mark Stein, is prevalent in a significant number of black British texts.¹⁵ Of course, neither *Light in the House Burnin’* or *Waiting in the Twilight* is a *Bildungsroman* in the traditional sense, nor are Levy and Riley’s ageing characters afforded the luxury of white middle-class spiritual ‘journeying’ in old age.¹⁶ On the contrary, their characters are subjected to marginalisation and sub-standard treatment, not simply because they are old but also because they are black. Discussing her own experience, Gilroy shows how such categories of oppression intersect: “I am thinking about my being Black

discourses: "Sharing stories with people of the same generation or with much younger people helps to develop a sense of oneself as a participant in the great social and historical upheavals of the last century."¹⁸ Chris Weedon echoes this point in her assessment of black British writing: "[Fiction] allows for the imaginative exploration of experience as it is lived by individuals and social groups and of the possibilities of living differently."¹⁹

It has been said of Levy's writing that her characters are: "just people who, save for the accident and drama of race, would be invisible."²⁵ Both *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Waiting in the Twilight* therefore use the idea of 'light' to interrogate issues of (in)visibility in relation to gender, race, and age, and to voice the unspoken. Riley highlights the risks writers take in interrogating such topics: "Granted there are questions, uncomfortable questions. But questions which create debate, however hostile, keep a normally hidden reality uncovered and raise the possibility of change."²⁶ Similarly, Levy's novels "confront silences in that they insist on the importance of remembering and speaking of one's own past, however painful a process this might be."²⁷

The painful aspect of the process of delving into the past is foregrounded by the fact that Levy and Riley's ageing characters still harbour secrets, surprises, and painful silences at the time of their deaths. Riley's Adella feels that motherhood outside wedlock means she shamed her family; "The shame sat on her, pushing her down further into her chair, the room suddenly full of disturbing scenes and memories from long in the past."²⁸ She is overwhelmed with regret, as she remembers the lengths poverty drove her to: "If only she had not needed those other men... all Beaumont knew how she had managed with the children."²⁹ These revelations are important, as they let the reader understand the implications for Adella of patriarchal and colonial oppression, and how it makes individuals feel responsible for their own exploitation. Or, as Weedon says: "[racism] produces arrogance in its perpetrators and humiliation and anger in its victims."³⁰ Adella's repressed anger and feelings of humiliation contribute to her physical ailments and strokes, as she embodies the damage inflicted by colonialism and patriarchy.³¹ Thereby, her ailing, ageing body takes on a symbolic dimension, representing black British working-class women's suffering.

In Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight*, fictionalised life-story telling and memory writing transmit and share experience in a contemporary society where fragmentation of communities hinders oral inter-generational transmission of knowledge:

Many cultures rely on oral history as a means of educating the next generation and continuing their cultural heritage of stories, experiences, and knowledge. In Western society, knowledge is often transmitted in written forms.³⁵

Both texts use the narrative device of the daughter as mediator between the older black British character and society, a link connecting the generations in history and real-time, Carol in Riley: "She still had Carol, Carol who had never disappointed her, and who she knew would always be with her,"³⁶

experiences and cultural knowledge to the next generation and build a stronger ethnic identity for their ethnic group.⁴¹

Individuals and communities are thereby able to not only claim ownership of their history, but to share it with others, too, as Pam Schweitzer argues: "Reminiscence is also a means of celebrating difference, bringing communities with different racial, cultural and religious backgrounds together to exchange life experience."⁴²

Andrea Levy and Joan Riley's memory writing recasts issues of identity and agency, and generates intimacy and emotional engagement. Gilroy comments on the importance of memory to the experience of ageing and reta

Suddenly the endless stretch of lonely hours filled only by the flickering lights of the television was too much to bear. Since she became sick all she ever did was fill the hours with memories, uncomfortable, half-buried memories; some good, some bad. I9aD .2.8vs -her38()JT4 35 Tw 3lmeT4 35 T.p Tw 3llig25.5(s)-dow

lonely and invisible, and perceived by others as having nothing valuable to contribute to society anymore.

Representations of Adella's ageing body in *Waiting in the Twilight* emphasise the physical weariness and chronic pain which rob her of self-esteem and quality of life: "She

opportunity to explore its construction and representation. Neither a victim nor an idealised character, the multi-faceted nature of Angela's father's character is reflected in the portrayal of him as the family breadwinner, with a fiery temper and a disciplinarian streak.⁷⁰ Angela's father is a proud man, and in taking care of his appearance and making a point of formality, he is upholding the cultural inheritance of the Caribbean 'Sunday Best' traditional dress code as a marker of respectability.⁷¹ He has worked hard and contributed to society, been a good father, husband, and provider for his family – a man of principle, resilient and loyal. However, as the family cat Willie becomes increasingly important to Angela's father in his old age, after his children have left home, his emotional response to the cat's disappearance at the end suggests his unacknowledged (but understandable) neediness. His response also reflects the detrimental effects of emotional repression for black British males struggling to reconcile stereotypes of conventional masculinity with race and class inequality.

Gradually, Angela's father relinquishes his patriarchal authority, as he loses his sense of self, and his ageing body is relegated to a deteriorating and alienated 'other'. When Angela visits her father in hospital, his loss of authority becomes clear to her, as she discovers the doctors have spoken to her mother about his condition and explained the various tests, but not to him. The silence not only reflects his loss of self-determination but also indicates the difficulties of communication within the NHS caused by differences of race and class, issues also raised by Riley in *Waiting in the Twilight*. This perceived loss of personal power is particularly poignant and devastating for Angela's father, whose masculinity is compromised as a result. The father's sense of loss of authority and status in retirement suggests that ageism reinforces the intersecting nature of race, class, and gender.

Endnotes

- 1 Andrea Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*. London: Headline Book Publishing, 1994, 4.
- 2 Beryl Gilroy, "Black old age... the diaspora of the senses?," *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader*. Kwesi Owosu, ed., London: Routledge, 2000, 122.
- 3 Mike Hepworth, *Stories of Ageing*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000, 23.
- 4 Hepworth, 8.
- 5 An exception is Lynda Aitken, Gabriele Griffin, *Gender Issues in Elder Abuse*. London: Sage, 1996, 68. This text makes brief reference to Riley's theme of old age, and discusses the novel's portrayal of intersecting categories of oppression; however, Aitken and Griffin don't engage with its literary merits.
- 6 Laura Niesen de Abruña, "Sea Changes: African-Caribbean and African Women Writers in England," *British Women Writing Fiction*. Abby Werlock, ed., Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000, 282. See also David Ellis, "'Wives and Workers': The Novels of Joan Riley," *Contemporary British Women Writers*. Emma Parker, ed., The Cromwell Press, Trowbridge: 2004, 68.
- 7 James Graham, "'This isn't Good Will Hunting': Londonstani and the Market for London's Multicultural Fictions," *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London* 6.2 (September 2008):<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/september2008/graham.html> [accessed 3 August 2010].
- 8 "Caribbean Histories Revealed":
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/caribbeanhistory/default.htm> [accessed 3 August 2010].
- 9 "The Separation and Reunion Forum": <http://www.serefo.org.uk/default.php> [accessed 12 August 2010].
- 10 "Introduction," "Mapping Memories: Reminiscence with Ethnic Minority Elders":
<http://www.age-exchange.org.uk/projects/past/mappingmemories/introduction.html> [accessed 3 August 2010].
- 11 Michael Perfect, "'Fold the paper and pass it on': Historical Silences and the Contrapuntal in Andrea Levy's Fiction," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46.1 (2010): 31.
- 12 Cesar and Sharon Meraz, *Black British Literature* (2000):
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- 13 Maria Helena Lima, "'Pivoting the Centre': The Fiction of Andrea Levy," *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature*, in Kadija Sesay, ed., Hertford: Hansib, 2005, 58.
- 14 Hepworth, 3.
- 15 Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004, xiii.
- 16 Recently critics have explored the potential for continued spiritual and intellectual 'journeying' in old age. See *Adventures of the Spirit: The Older Woman in the Works of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and Other Contemporary Women Writers*. Phyllis Perrakis, ed., Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007.
- 17 Gilroy, 122.
- 18 "Reminiscence," "Mapping Memories: Reminiscence with Ethnic Minority Elders,"
<http://www.age-exchange.org.uk/projects/past/mappingmemories/reminiscence.html> [accessed 3 August 2010].

- 45 Hepworth, 30.
- 46 Levy, 244.
- 47 Riley, 140.
- 48 Ibid., 121.
- 49 Gilroy, 123.
- 50 Zoe Brennan, *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2005, 22.
- 51 Riley, 13.
- 52 Ibid., 163.
- 53 Ibid., 142.
- 54 Ibid., 148.
- 55 "Reminiscence," "Mapping Memories: Reminiscence with Ethnic Minority Elders,"
<http://www.age-exchange.org.uk/projects/past/mappingmemories/reminiscence.html>
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- 56 Riley, 140.
- 57 Ibid., 72.
- 58 Ibid., 72.
- 59 Ibid., 160.
- 60 Ibid., 164.
- 61 Ibid., 165.
- 62 "Background," "Mapping Memories: Reminiscence with Ethnic Minority Elders":
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- 64 Riley, 164.
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- 67 Levy, 35.
- 68 Ibid., 35.
- 69 Claire Alexander, *The Art of Being Black: The Creation of Black British Youth Identities*.
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- 70 Levy, 6.
- 71 Arifa Akbar, "From Windrush to Ms Dynamite: 50 Years of Black British Style," *The
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August 2010].
- 72 Levy, 90.
- 73 Ibid., 85.
- 74 Hepworth, 36.
- 75 Levy, 67.
- 76 Ibid., 85.
- 77 Ibid., 87.

78 Ibid., 88.

79 Ibid., 213.

80 Ibid., 153.

81 Ibid., 177-8.