

OIB British Option

Synoptic Topic: Postcolonial Writing

Six Poems

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Derek Walcott: A Far Cry From Africa

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,
Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.
Corpses are scattered through a paradise.
5 Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:
"Waste no compassion on these separate dead!"
Statistics justify and scholars seize
The salients of colonial policy.
What is that to the white child hacked in bed?
10 To savages, expendable as Jews?

Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break
In a white dust of ibises whose cries
Have wheeled since civilization's dawn
From the parched river or beast-teeming plain.
15 The violence of beast on beast is read
As natural law, but upright man
Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.
Delirious as these worried beasts, his wars
Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum,
20 While he calls courage still that native dread
Of the white peace contracted by the dead.

Again brutish necessity wipes its hands
Upon the napkin of a dirty cause, again
A waste of our compassion, as with Spain,
25 The gorilla wrestles with the superman.
I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
30 Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?

Sujata Bhatt: A Different History

In this poem, I mention the Hindu goddess, Sarasvati; she is the goddess of knowledge. She presides over all the fine arts and in India she is frequently worshiped in libraries.

Great Pan is not dead;
he simply emigrated
to India.
Here, the gods roam freely,
5 disguised as snakes or monkeys;
every tree is sacred
and it is a sin
to be rude to a book.
It is a sin to shove a book aside
10 with your foot,
a sin to slam books down
hard on a table,
a sin to toss one carelessly
across a room.
15 You must learn how to turn the pages gently
without disturbing Sarasvati,
without offending the tree
from whose wood the paper was made.

20 Which language
has not been the oppressor's tongue?
Which language
truly meant to murder someone?
And how does it happen
that after the torture, after the soul has been cropped
25 with a long scythe swooping out
of the conqueror's face -
the unborn grandchildren
grow to love that strange language.

Jackie Kay: Things Fall Apart

My birth father lifted his hands above his head
and put the white mask of God on his handsome face.

A born-again man now, gone were the old tribal ways,
the ancestral village - African chiefs' nonsense, he says.

5 I could see his eyes behind the hard alabaster.
A father, no more real, still less real - not Wole Soyinka.

Less flesh than dark earth; less blood than red dust.
Less bone than Kano camels; less like me than Chinua Achebe.

10 Christianity had scrubbed his black face with a hard brush.
'You are my past sin, let us deliberate on new birth.'

The sun slips and slides and finally drops
into the swimming pool, in Nico hotel, Abuja; lonely pinks.

I knock back my dry spritzer, take in the songs
of African birds. I think he had my hands, my father.

Margaret Atwood: The Immigrants

They are allowed to inherit
the sidewalks involved as palm lines, bricks
exhausted and soft, the deep
lawns smells, orchards whorled
5 to the land's contours, the inflected weather

only to be told they are too poor
to keep it up, or someone
has noticed and wants to kill them; or the towns
pass laws which declare them obsolete.

10 I see them coming
up from the hold smelling of vomit,
infested, emaciated, their skins grey
with travel; as they step on shore

15 the old countries recede, become
perfect, thumbnail castles preserved
like gallstones in a glass bottle, the
towns dwindle upon the hillsides
in a light paperweight-clear.

20 They carry their carpetbags and trunks
with clothes, dishes, the family pictures;
they think they will make an order
like the old one, sow miniature orchards,
carve children and flocks out of wood

25 but always they are too poor, the sky
is flat, the green fruit shrivels
in the prairie sun, wood is for burning;
and if they go back, the towns

30 in time have crumbled, their tongues
stumble among awkward teeth, their ears
are filled with the sound of breaking glass.
I wish I could forget them
and so forget myself:

35 my mind is a wide pink map
across which move year after year
arrows and dotted lines, further and further,
people in railway cars

40 their heads stuck out of the windows
at stations, drinking milk or singing,
their features hidden with beards or shawls
day and night riding across an ocean of unknown
land to an unknown land.

John Agard: Checking Out Me History

Dem tell me
Dem tell me
Wha dem want to tell me

5 Bandage up me eye with me own history
Blind me to my own identity

Dem tell me bout 1066 and all dat
dem tell me bout Dick Whittington and he cat
But Toussaint L'Ouverture
no dem never tell me bout dat

10 Toussaint
a slave
with vision
lick back
Napoleon
15 battalion
and first Black
Republic born
Toussaint de thorn
to de French
20 Toussaint de beacon
of de Haitian Revolution

Dem tell me bout de man who discover de balloon
and de cow who jump over de moon
Dem tell me bout de dish ran away with de spoon
25 but dem never tell me bout Nanny de maroon

Nanny
See-far woman
of mountain dream
fire-woman struggle
30 hopeful stream
to freedom river

Dem tell me bout Lord Nelson and Waterloo
but dem never tell me bout Shaka de great Zulu
Dem tell me bout Columbus and 1492
35 but what happen to de Caribs and de Arawaks too

Dem tell me bout Florence Nightingale and she lamp
and how Robin Hood used to camp
Dem tell me bout ole King Cole was a merry ole soul
but dem never tell me bout Mary Seacole

40 From Jamaica
she travel far
to the Crimean War
she volunteer to go
and even when de British said no

45 she still brave the Russian snow
a healing star
among the wounded
a yellow sunrise
to the dying

50 Dem tell me
Dem tell me wha dem want to tell me
But now I checking out me own history
I carving out me identity

Olive Senior: Colonial Girls school

Borrowed images
willed our skins pale
muffled our laughter
lowered our voices
5 let out our hems
dekinked our hair
denied our sex in gym tunics and bloomers
harnessed our voices to madrigals
and genteel airs
10 yoked our minds to declensions in Latin
and the language of Shakespeare

Told us nothing about ourselves
There was nothing about us at all

15 How those pale northern eyes and
aristocratic whispers once erased us
How our loudness, our laughter
debased us

There was nothing left of ourselves
Nothing about us at all

20 Studying: *History Ancient and Modern*
Kings and Queens of England
Steppes of Russia
Wheatfields of Canada

25 There was nothing of our landscape there
Nothing about us at all

Marcus Garvey turned twice in his grave
'Thirty-eight was a beacon. A flame.
They were talking of desegregation
in Little Rock, Arkansas. Lumumba
30 and the Congo. To us: mumbo-jumbo.
We had read Vachal Lindsay's
vision of the jungle

Feeling nothing about ourselves
There was nothing about us at all

35 Months, years, a childhood memorising
Latin declensions
(For our language
- 'bad talking' -
detentions)

40 Finding nothing about us there
Nothing about us at all

So, friend of my childhood years
One day we'll talk about
How the mirror broke
45 Who kissed us awake
Who let Anansi from his bag

For isn't it strange how
northern eyes
in the brighter world before us now

50 Pale?