



Andrea Levy: *Never Far from Nowhere*

(1996)

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Genre: Novel. Country: England.

Andrea Levy's second novel, *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996) retakes the main themes already present in her debut novel, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994): racial prejudice, discrimination, the quest for identity, marginalization, and, last but not least, double consciousness. The setting of *Never Far from Nowhere* brings the reader to London, to a family of Jamaican immigrants in the 1960s. The story is narrated alternately by the sisters Vivien and Olive Charles, thus the author providing two different views on the dilemmas the individual members of the family have to face.

The Charles family exemplifies perfectly what W.E.B. DuBois called double consciousness. In his view, double consciousness "is a peculiar sensation, . . . , this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, W. E. B., *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, 2). As a consequence, black individuals are not judged by their own merits and achievements, but are always compared to whites and their set of values. The situation of Caribbean immigrants in post-war Britain can easily be compared to the situation of African Americans in the United States. DuBois proclaims that there are always two sides of one's identity and these are in constant opposition.

One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. (Du Bois, W. E. B., *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, 2-3)

Similarly, the Jamaican immigrants to Britain find it almost impossible to reconcile the pride in their heritage and the will to fit in. The British situation is more complex than the American one as, technically speaking, Jamaican people were, until 1962, legal citizens of the United Kingdom; hence when Jamaican people arrived in Britain in the post-war era, they were going "home" to their mother country. Moreover, many of them were returning to a state they fought for during the Second World War. That is why their disappointment was enormous when – in addition to the common challenges of diaspora – they had to face contempt, neglect, and rejection by the predominantly white population, which led to ambivalent feelings of identity and belonging.

The thesis proposed by Du Bois in 1897 about double-consciousness was further developed within the context of British cultural theory by Paul Gilroy, who, in his seminal 1993 study *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, introduces the notion of a non-homogeneous nation-state base nationality. He prefers to see the

phenomenon of nationality and state from “an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 1993, 15). In his opinion, the history of the slave trade across the Atlantic laid the foundations of modern double consciousness, which gives rise to an internal struggle about how to reconcile ‘blackness’ with being part of white European history.

Double consciousness remains at the centre of Levy’s attention throughout the novel *Never Far from Nowhere*. Whereas the daughters struggle to understand this attitude and they suffer under this curse on an everyday basis, their mother, Rose Charles, denies her blackness and her Jamaican cultural and ethnic heritage in all possible ways. Olive describes her mother’s stand thus:

My mother . . . tried to believe that she was not black. Although she knew that she and my dad were not the only people who came over here from Jamaica in the fifties, she liked to think that because they were fair-skinned they were the only decent people who came. The only ones with a “bit of class”. And she believed that the English would recognize this . . . She used to talk to me about what she thought of the black people here . . . —nothing good of course. But she sat looking in my black face telling me. (Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, 1996, 7; hereafter cited in text as *NF*)

Rose attempts to assimilate at all costs and does not approve of her fellow-Caribbeans who do not make an effort to do so. She is persuaded that if the Caribbeans chose to live in Britain that they should blend in. Unlike Rose, the daughters, however, admit that white British people are not very enthusiastic about Caribbean immigrants, as is evident from Vivien’s commentary: “My parents helped this country, I thought. . . . But even when I was young, when I was still having my cheek pulled by passers-by and people winked at me on the tube, even then I knew that English people hated us” (*NF*, 5). In spite of the Caribbean involvement in the British armed forces during the Second World War, post-war immigrants from former British colonies are not welcomed. Whereas Rose does not admit it and tries to ignore racial prejudice, the second generation, represented by her daughters in the novel, does not fully understand the reasons for such racially motivated hatred and they want to fight against it. This tension created within the family leads to the manifestation of the dissimilar view of not/belonging to the mother country. In this context, Sofía Muñoz-Vadavieso points out that the early novels by Andrea Levy “show how, for some of the children and grandchildren of the first generation of post-war immigrants who are no longer rooted in the old country of their ancestors, but still on the edges of mainstream society, belonging in Britain remains an issue” (101). Vivien and Olive do not understand why they should not be considered English if they were born in Britain. Both in *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and in *Never Far from Nowhere*, the protagonists from the first generation typically want to assimilate, whereas the second generation prefers to cherish the idea of multiculturalism. This difference becomes apparent in the different patterns of behaviour adopted by the mother, who avoids people from the Caribbean and does not socialize or speak with them, contrary to her daughters, who consider themselves fully-fledged British citizens. Moreover, they remain in the dark about their Caribbean ancestry as Rose does not share any details of it with her children. Similarly, Michael Perfect believes that “She [Rose] regards the country with much distaste and does not believe herself or her family to be “black”. As in the former novel [*Every Light in the House Burnin’*], the first-generation immigrant parent is reluctant to talk about their life prior to travelling to Britain and is keen to negate rather than celebrate their family’s roots in Jamaica” (33). In contrast to Rose, Vivien and Olive desperately search on their own for their Caribbean ancestry.

Levy derives the experience both Vivien and Olive have to go through from her own childhood. She had to face the low expectations her teachers had about her achievements; she grew up in a rather underprivileged north London neighbourhood. Unlike the other children, she always had to prove that she was as good as the other, white children:

I was educated to be English. Alongside me—learning, watching, eating and playing—were white children. But those white children would never have to grow up to question whether they were English or

not. . . I just wanted to fit in and be part of everything that was around me, and these strange parents were holding me back. (Levy, “This Is My England”, 2000)

As a child, Levy, similarly to her protagonists, did not understand why the white environment was so hostile towards her. In the eyes of children, it was unintelligible to them why they were always pressed to survive on the margins of society.

As a result of the open prejudice shown by white people, the black characters in the novel question their identity. Racial discrimination is, for example, manifested in verbal attacks when the members of the Charles family are addressed by whites with racially loaded words such as wog, coon, darkie, or coloured. The novel foregrounds the theory of pigmentocracy, which was very prevalent during the era of slavery and which still plays a role in modern society. It distinguishes various shades of skin colour. The darker the skin, the more likely people were to become victims of racial abuse. David Moadel argues that “the effects of pigmentocracy have been devastating for its victims. The ravages of slavery and post-bellum civil rights violations have been well documented, but the modern effects of pigmentocracy can also prove deep and drastic” (Moadel, “Pigmentocracy,” 2013, 1703). In accordance with this theory, the skin colour and its shade was the decisive factor in segregating people into various social classes and thus creating a social hierarchy.

In *Never Far from Nowhere* social stratification is described in the context of housing. The Charleses live in council housing, which automatically stigmatizes them as working-class. Matthew Taunton argues that within the housing estate “these houses and flats operate as markers of class and the council estate in particular is a symbol of poverty, crime and unemployment” (Taunton, “Council Housing”,24). Council housing was demanded especially by those who were in need. The lower classes wanted at least a flat, however small, of their own. Since rather poor people who were often unemployed and therefore surviving on state benefits accumulated in the housing estates, they were perceived by the general British public as a negative enterprise. Taunton summarizes this popular belief thus: “the boundaries of the council estate became ‘the frontier of the class divide’” (Taunton, *Fictions*, 162). In relation to the novel, Levy describes within its text how the family perceived their housing conditions:

Olive and me were born in London. Not within the sound of Bow bells, . . . but in Islington, north London. . . . [where they] found rooms in a house. The downstairs of what is now a very smart dwelling near Gibson Square. But what was then, and as we grew up, just a notch above a slum. Cooking, eating and living in one room, sleeping in two others. (*NF*, 3)

Historically, the reach of the sound of the bells of the church of Mary-le-Bow signified the boundaries of the City of London. Therefore, on the one hand, Olive and Vivien belong to the metropolis, as Islington is also part of it, but, on the other hand, their place of residence pushes them socially to the outskirts of the city, and, therefore, to the social periphery. As a consequence of the social diversification brought about by housing conditions, Taunton proposes that “Levy’s council estate appears as a separate ecosystem, and the racism which Olive faces is a part of the reality of that ecosystem. Racism is one of the results of the separation of estate-dwellers from the rest of the city, not its cause” (“Council Housing”, 27). As the girls become more identity-conscious, Vivien in particular grows dissatisfied with the housing estate: “I began to hate going back to my house—to my flat—to my council flat” (*NF*, 148) because she understands that the quality and location of one’s dwelling is a marker of social status.

Another signifier of social hierarchy and assimilation is food. As Githire argues, “food is a quintessential marker of assimilative integration” (865). However, the choice of food also marks “the struggle to fit the ‘norm’ of society and the sense of estrangement that not identifying with the hegemonic culture entails” (865). Rose and Newton want to assimilate with the British, but every year they receive a Christmas cake from Jamaica. It is only the father who delights in eating it and he eats it in his own way: “he pushed the black gooey cake with his

finger, then put it in his mouth and ate it with his mouth open so you had to turn away from the sight” (*NF*, 68). It is the only thing that Winston openly, albeit silently, admits to being a Jamaican tradition in his household. Unlike her husband, Rose does not share his sentimentality about Jamaican food. This attitude is well exemplified by the occasion when Peter, an English boyfriend of Olive, cooks spaghetti. Although Rose praises him at first because Olive’s “mum would smile and say how she liked a man who could cook. He made us things we’d never had before like “spaghetti bolognese” (*NF*, 70), later she expresses her preference for English food: “it’s very nice, Peter, very nice, but I don’t like foreign food” (*NF*, 70). Githire explains the reasons for such behaviour: “it is obvious . . . that Rose Charles has no problem with the taste or the smell of Spaghetti Bolognese. Rather, its unpalatability lies in its foreignness, its ‘otherness’, and perhaps in its capacity to threaten Rose Charles’s vulnerable sense of Englishness” (865). Rose tries to avoid everything that is not typically English in order not to show explicitly any sort of otherness.

On another occasion, when Vivien throws a little party to celebrate her being accepted at a college, her friends, tied by stereotypical thinking, bring a bottle of rum: from the point of view of their limited cultural awareness, rum is the national beverage of Jamaica. Rose ignores the rum, being “unimpressed” (*NF*, 230) by such a present. She thanks Eddie, Vivien’s boyfriend, by saying “I don’t drink much. . . . I don’t really like rum” (*NF*, 230). Such an utterance surprises Eddie, who again reacts in a stereotypical way: “I thought everyone from Jamaica liked rum” (*NF*, 230). Instead of rum, Rose serves tea as she finds it more appropriate for an English party: “I prefer a nice cup of tea” (*NF*, 230). Rose’s choice of tea over rum, however, disappoints the guests, as they meant to please Rose. As Rose desires to prove she is knowledgeable about English habits, she prepares a regular afternoon tea with sandwiches, which, in the Charles family, symbolize a way of assimilation. Whereas for the parents the sandwiches stand for the taste of their initial British food, for the daughters, the sandwiches denote their parents’ overexaggerated sense of Englishness.

If the theory of pigmentocracy in relation to racial discrimination is applied to *Never Far from Nowhere*, the reader notices that the sisters have different shade of black skin – whereas Vivien has a relatively pale skin, Olive is dark-skinned. Therefore, Vivien is often mistaken for a young Spanish or Italian lady with a potentially Jewish lineage on account of her surname. Vivien evaluates it, “We were sisters and we looked alike. . . . But I had a light skin—a high colour. In a dim light I could be taken for Italian or Spanish. Olive was darker. Black. The Caribbean legacy. Our parents were from Jamaica” (*NF*, 1). The quote above indicates two semi-biographical features that permeate Levy’s fiction: first, a fair-skinned black West Indian protagonist who is believed to be Italian or Spanish, and second, a possible Jewish lineage. Implicitly, Levy is searching for her own identity. As indicated in several interviews, Levy faces the same set of questions about her ancestry as Vivien does, whereas the dark shade of Olive’s skin is itself evidential of her origin. As David Moadel postulates, “as colonists and their progeny oppressed those with darker skin tones for many decades, this became the norm, and lighter skin tone became equated in people’s mind with higher sociopolitical standing” (1704). However, even if Vivien’s skin is paler, she still does not pass for a white and is also the target for discrimination. The family heritage is described in detail in order to show the complexity of their ancestry. Rose was

a country girl brought up on a farm . . . Her great-grandmother was a slave, but in her freedom she married a fairer-skinned man. [Vivien’s and Olive’s] grandmother married a man who descended from Scottish farmers. [Vivien’s and Olive’s] mother had fair skin with strong African features. (*NF*, 2)

On the father’s side, there are even more complicated ethnic relations, as Vivien describes:

My father’s mother was part Spanish, part Indian, part African. She married a man of north African descent who lived in a large house in St Andrew, . . . The Caribbean legacy left me [Vivien] with a black skin, a head of tight frizzy hair streaked with red, and green eyes. (*NF*, 2)

Olive does not want to deny her black identity. However, her mother constantly attempts to persuade her that she

is not black. In the dialogue below, Olive is firm about her notion of her own identity, whereas her mother seeks to argue that Olive should not see herself in term of skin colour:

“I’m black,” I [Olive] used to say, when I was old enough to butt in. “Don’t be silly, Olive, you’re not coloured.” “No, Mum, I’m black.” “No, Olive, you’re not black, and that’s enough of this stupidity.” “Well I’m not white, I have to be something.” “You’re not white and you’re not black—you’re you.” (*NF*, 7)

Although Olive’s mother tries to shift attention from ethnicity/race to individual personality traits, Olive remains convinced that she must form her own opinion on the issue of identity. She argues “I tried to explain that now I was a grown-up I liked being black. I wanted to be black. Being black was not a bad thing, being black was something to be proud of” (*NF*, 8). Her family does not understand why she is so proud of her blackness. In Githire’s words, “for Olive . . . the assumption of an “authentically” black identity and a return to Jamaica appear the only solutions to escape prejudice, discrimination, and xenophobia” (865). Olive, however, realises that it is the only identity that she has that she can be sure of. Therefore, she explains that “I’m sure Mum and Vivien think I go on about colour too much. . . . But they don’t know—they haven’t lived my life, they haven’t gone through what I’ve gone through” (*NF*, 8). She wants to pass the message of her blackness to her daughter Amy: “I am black, and so is my daughter . . . And I tell Amy that she is black” (*NF*, 8). In many respects Olive comes to represent the strongest voice of black consciousness.

On account of the colour of her skin, Olive feels like a social outcast. Bettina von Staden supports this view in claiming that the novel

convincingly shows how the continuous experience of racism can lead to social exclusion. Olive feels rejected by society and becomes apathetic. She loses the life-chances she may have had when she was born. . . . Every gain in her life she attributes to her own strength and every loss she suffers to the racist society. (28)

As Olive believes she is pushed to the periphery of British society, she inspects her West Indian heritage. Since she does not have first-hand experience of Jamaica, she succumbs to the stereotypical image of it as a land of sunshine and golden beaches where she wishes to settle, which would be a diaspora in reverse – from Britain to the ancestral home of her parents. Olive hopes to be free of racial prejudice there and to be able to “live somewhere where being black doesn’t make you different. Where being black means you belong. In Jamaica people will be proud of me” (*NF*, 272–73). Her mother is, however, very sceptical about her possible happiness in the West Indies. She warns that Olive “doesn’t know what’s it like in Jamaica . . . And I tell her, they don’t want you there. . . . I can go back but you children can’t” (*NF*, 280–81). In other words, Olive would not belong there either and would consequently experience the same hardship as her parents did when they arrived in Britain.

In Vivien’s case, a train journey to college triggers an epiphany about her identity. She engages in a conversation with a white lady who stereotypically asks “Where do you come from, dear?” (*NF*, 282) Before answering the question, Vivien, however, thinks twice and does not think primarily of the geographical location of her origin but rather how she is proud of her achievement: “I’ve come a long way, I thought” (*NF*, 282). Yet, being aware of what kind of response is expected, she continues her thoughts in the following way: “Then I wondered what country she would want me to come from as I looked in her eyes” (*NF*, 282). Knowing that a non-stereotypical answer would not be met with an understanding of the cultural and racial implications, Vivien concludes the novel by saying: “my family are from Jamaica . . . But I am English” (*NF*, 282). In this last sentence, Vivien expresses her final judgement on her identity. She admits her Jamaican heritage but also acknowledges that her identity is defined by British society and culture. Britain is the place where she belongs, not only geographically but also culturally. She feels relieved when such a stand is supported by her white friend Eddie: “Oh well, you’re

a Londoner then, like me” (*NF*, 136). Therefore, Michael Perfect is correct to propose a conclusion on Olive’s and Vivien’s identity:

by the end of the novel, then, neither sister has fully resolved their crisis of identity, and Rose’s refusal to talk about the family’s past and her rejection of their hybridized heritage seem to be largely responsible for bringing about Olive’s determined adoption of a singular ‘blackness’ and Vivien’s desperate attempts to assimilate into ‘whiteness’. (34)

The novel *Never Far from Nowhere* reiterates the racial tensions of post-war Caribbean immigrants to Britain but does not conclusively solve them. The issues of race, identity, diaspora, and double consciousness are discussed in order to highlight the difficulties individuals with a black colonial heritage continue to face in contemporary Britain.

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