



## Andrea Levy: *Fruit of the Lemon*

(1999)

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Genre: Novel. Country: England.

Similarly to her previous novels, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Never Far From Nowhere*, *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), Andrea Levy's third novel, has at its centre the theme of identity. W.E.B. Du Bois, in his *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and Paul Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic* (1993), have called the dilemma of reconciling two identities double consciousness. In the essay "This Is My England" (*Guardian*, 2000), Levy herself voices her attitude to double consciousness and identity: "Identity! Sometimes it makes my head hurt – sometimes my heart. So what am I? Where do I fit into Britain?" She explores this topic in the novel through the eyes of the second generation of post-war Caribbean immigrants in the United Kingdom. The state of being split between two cultures is indicated even by the structure of the novel, which is composed of two halves. Whereas the first part focuses on life in England, the second is devoted to Jamaica. England is depicted as boring, flat, grey, and ridden with clichés and prejudice, in contrast to Jamaica, which is portrayed as a country full of colours, spirit, and adventure.

Faith Jackson, the main protagonist, is torn between British and Jamaican culture as soon as she realises she does not fully belong in Britain. Even though she was born and educated in Britain, she is constantly reminded of her Jamaican ancestry, starting already in primary school, where white boys keep repeating: "your mum and dad came on a banana boat. ... Faith is a darkie" (*Fruit of the Lemon*, henceforth abbreviated as *FL*, 1999, 3). Shocked by this revelation, she enquires about her family history. However, at home Faith learns hardly anything about it as her parents wish to leave their Jamaican heritage behind:

My mum and dad never talked about their lives before my brother Carl and I were born. They didn't sit us in front of the fire and tell long tales of life in Jamaica – of palm trees and yams and playing by rivers. There was no "oral tradition" in our family. Most of my childhood questions to them were answered with "That was a long time ago," or "What you want to know about that for?" (*FL*, 4).

Şebnem Toplu believes that Faith "belongs neither to her ancestral homeland, Jamaica, nor to England, the legendary 'Motherland' of her ex-colonies. The hybridity created by these circumstances is resolved by Faith's journey to Jamaica" (2005). Unable to find a sense of belonging in either place, she experiences an epiphany which makes her think she belongs to the African race, which becomes a stable point of reference for her. However, in the third section of the book, which might be considered as a coda and which is titled "England", Faith returns to England from Jamaica. Here Levy uses a circular structure and repetitive patterns. Similarly to the day when her parents, Mildred and Wade, arrived in Britain, Faith is greeted by fireworks. For its description, Levy uses exactly the same phrase that was employed for the description of the fireworks

welcoming Faith's parents: "it may be a welcome for me having travelled so far and England needing me" (*FL*, 339). The resemblance is made stronger since both Mildred and Wade and Faith arrive on Guy Fawkes Night. Sáez argues that "repeating her parents' experience and travel, Faith claims England as her home and she comes with a mission: 'I was coming home to tell everyone – My mum and dad came to England on a banana boat'" (2006 and *FL* 339), but they hoped to arrive in their mother country to be greeted by fireworks: "Your dad thought it might have been a welcome for us, having come so far and England needing us. But I didn't think he could be right. And he wasn't" (*FL*, 8). Right at the point of arrival, they face a great disillusionment.

All the sections of the novel are composed in the form of a puzzle. Although Levy narrates linearly, the main protagonist, Faith, has to assemble the story of her parents' past like a mosaic. Baxter calls such a method of writing "un/folding" (2014, 80). Faith Jackson's official familial history manifests itself visually and verbally in the form of a conspicuously sparse family tree, consisting of her father, mother, brother, and herself. However, with each individual story that Faith narrates, the family tree gradually un/folds to reveal branching structures of alternative histories and experiences (Baxter, 2014, 80). The gradual process of including the family tree charts which are embedded into the individual chapters of the Jamaican part of the novel reveals the process of discovering "people and places [Faith] had never expected to have a connection to" (Perfect, 2010, 36). These connections turn out to extend to Africa, the United States, and Scotland. Such diversity makes the ethnic and cultural mix of Faith's heritage, which stretches over eight generations, even more interesting. Consequently, it can be claimed that the family trees are employed as a metaphor for searching for ancestral and racial roots, with the ultimate goal of discovering one's own identity.

After the Jacksons settle in Britain, similarly to the Jacobs and Charles families from the author's previous novels, they try to assimilate as quickly as possible. One sign of social status is the quality of housing. Faith's parents aspire to belong to a middle-class family which means that they must, in accordance with the very British belief "my home is my castle", at least own their own house. Their social mobility is expressed through better living conditions; when Mildred and Wade arrive in Britain, they have to share a shabby room with Wade's brother. They even have to share the toilet with other tenants, which utterly shocks Mildred as she has always dreamt of England as a civilised country and these conditions are worse than those in Jamaica. Mildred comments on her disillusionment with the housing conditions: "I never thought English people live like that" (*FL*, 9). When she gives birth to the children, Mildred and Wade are separated as the council is unable to find them suitable accommodation. After a while, they get a flat on a housing estate, which, on the one hand, means an improvement, but on the other, living on a housing estate identifies them as a working-class family. After a few years, they consider themselves to have acquired a British identity when they manage to buy a house, which is used as a leitmotif that Levy employs in all three of her early novels. In the eyes of the Jacksons, the ownership of a house, even in a less affluent London suburb, is a sign of true British identity. When they move into the house, they sigh with relief: "We finally arrive home" (*FL*, 11).

Faith tests her identity in her everyday contact with the British, who constantly ask her:

"And whereabouts are you from, Faith?" "London," I said. The man laughed a little. I meant more what country are you from? I didn't bother to say I was born in England, that I was English, because I knew that was not what he wanted to hear. "My parents are Jamaican." "Well, you see, I thought that," he began. "As soon as you walked in I thought I bet she's from Jamaica." "Just my parents are." I added, but he went on. (*FL*, 130)

The ignorance of the difference between the first and second generations of immigrants makes Faith's quest for identity even more pressing. Leigh Anne Vrabel maintains that because Faith is "trapped between two worldviews, [she] literally takes to her bed until an invitation to visit Jamaica opens a new world of possibilities for her" (2006, 53). Upon her arrival in Jamaica, Faith is overwhelmed by the feeling of being a stranger. She is lost and experiences a culture shock that prevents her from thinking and behaving rationally:

I felt out of place—everything was a little familiar but not quite. Like a dream. Culture shock is how the feeling is described. A name made up by someone with a stiff upper lip who wanted to deny the feelings of panic and terror. The feelings that made me want to run for a corner and cover my head with my arms and scream for my mummy. (*FL*, 169)

Faith has a stereotypical idea of Jamaican life that derives only from mediated sources, whether exaggerated family reminiscences or popular myths. Arriving in Jamaica, she is shocked at the level of refinement. For example, she expected very primitive houses, only to find that one of her relatives lives in “[a] grand house. A single-storey house with stunted doric pillars at the front gate and matching pillars on either side of the main door... It was Violet’s house... There were three bathrooms and six bedrooms” (*FL*, 275). Although she did not want to assimilate into a “British” identity in the United Kingdom as she felt she was already a part of it by right, having been born in Britain, now, in Jamaica, she surprisingly decides to assimilate into the local culture:

I changed my clothes. Out of my jeans and into a cotton blouse and a skirt that I could flap at my knees. I put sandals on my feet and pulled my hair back tight off my face and into a bun on the top of my head. When Auntie Coral saw me, she gave me that look I had wanted before—the misty-eyed tearful look. She gasped, threw her hands into the air, clapped and shouted, “Ahh, my Faith, but now you look like a Jamaican!” (*FL*, 238)

She learns to treasure her ethnic identity. The trip to Jamaica enriches Faith’s knowledge of the family’s history and she appreciates the feeling of finally being able to identify with her Jamaican heritage: “They laid a past out in front of me. They wrapped me in a family history and swaddled me tight in its stories. And I was taking back that family to England. But it would not fit in a suitcase—I was smuggling it home” (*FL*, 326). The stay in Jamaica becomes a catalytic experience for Faith, who returns to Britain not only stronger but also more confident about her rediscovered sense of identity.

Unlike her parents, who give up some of their original aspirations, Faith wants success in her professional life. She does not hesitate to think that she has the same rights as white Britons, as she was born and educated in Britain in a prestigious school for white girls and has her college diploma. However, when Faith is interviewed for her first job at the almost exclusively white BBC costume department, she has to bear the burden of her ethnicity in public for the first time: “Your work has an ethnicity which shines through ... A sort of African or South American feel which is obviously part of you. Don’t you find that exciting, Faith?” (*FL*, 31) Faith is horrified by this assertion. As McGee rightly argues, “Levy’s tiny, subtle hints that Faith’s fluid existence of open-minded living arrangements, cross-cultural friendships and easy socializing is no race-blind utopia are suddenly foregrounded when Faith is told there are no black dressers” (*FL*, 25). This epiphany comes out of the blue and Faith is unprepared for such a discovery.

On a different occasion, when she visits a friend in a perfect English countryside setting, during a walk Faith is instructed by Simon in the local rules of behaviour: “It’s a sort of tradition when you’re on a walk, ... when you meet someone you greet them” (*FL*, 125). Simon’s mother cannot help but add “It’s just to show you’re friend not foe” (*FL*, 125). She feels humiliated and is surprised that the colour of her skin makes her the target for local attention and people gaze at her as if at a curiosity. Faith, following the advice to exchange greetings, does not understand the reactions. For example, a passing couple “looked at [her] and did not respond”, and someone else “stared at [her] instead, turning round to look long after he had passed” (*FL*, 127). Such behaviour and this reception on the part of the local people shake Faith’s belief in her British identity and she realises what it means to feel like a foreigner in her own country. Faith develops a racial awareness and therefore when she returns to Britain, it becomes clear for her that the whole struggle for identity remains reduced to the contrast between different skin colours: “what it all comes down to in the end is black against white. It was simple” (*FL*, 159).

Faith’s schizophrenic experience of identity has already been indicated in the choice of the novel’s title, *Fruit of*

*the Lemon*. The title of the book itself was inspired by a song that Andrea Levy's mother used to sing, named "Lemon Tree". The song "Lemon Tree" was popularised by Will Holt in the 1960s, and consequently the song was current in the UK in the second half of the twentieth century. The lyrics include a refrain that twice repeats the following lines: "The lemon flower is pretty and the lemon flower is sweet, but the fruit of the lemon is impossible to eat" (FL, 195). Levy frames *Fruit of the Lemon* with the refrain of this song. The novel is prefixed by these lines and it closes with the same lines, which symbolically mark the bittersweet quality of a nice-looking fruit that is inedible because of the sourness underneath its skin, signifying the duality of identity. Although Faith might be officially recognised as a British citizen by law, she will never be accepted by the white public as a fully-fledged British person.

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