



Andrea Levy: *Every Light in the House Burnin'*

(1994)

Pavlina Flajsarova (Palacky University Olomouc)

Genre: Novel. Country: England.

In her novels, Andrea Levy addresses the history of post-war Caribbean immigration to Britain. In *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) the author presents a Jamaican family who relocate from the Caribbean and settle in the United Kingdom. The passage they undertake sailing across the seas stands as illustrative for the journey that many former British colonial subjects have made after the Second World War in response to the calls for help in rebuilding the war-stricken British economy and in order to seek a better life in Britain. They follow the typical pattern; the father of the family arrives first and his relatives join him later. The novel is set in London in the 1960s and 1970s and has at its centre what has been termed the Windrush generation: those who arrived with the wave of immigration following the docking of the SS Empire Windrush at Tilbury on 22nd June 1948.

In *Every Light in the House Burnin'* Levy builds upon her personal experience, as the affinity of the names of her family members to the names of the characters in the novel suggests. Angela (close to Andrea), the narrator, is the youngest of four children. Her father's name, Winston, is the same as that of Levy's father. The trigger for Angela to learn about her Caribbean heritage is the fact that her father is dying of a rapidly progressing brain tumour. Before that point, the members of the Jacobs family, in spite of sharing a small flat, lived somewhat independent lives. This parallels the silence that characterizes the Caribbean aspect of Angela's parents' lives, who dearly remember the Caribbean, but wish to start a new life in Britain, and therefore shy away from sharing too much of their Caribbean experience with their children; the children were born in Britain and consider themselves, above all, British. Charlotte Beyer argues that *Every Light in the House Burnin'* "redresses the silences surrounding portrayals of black British ageing experiences" (2012, p.106). The clash between the first and second generations is obvious in their attitudes towards identity and Britishness. Winston refuses to discuss details about his job at the Post Office, and in public he seems ashamed of his name, Jacobs, which signifies that he is the descendant of a slave. Angela comments on this, saying "my dad didn't like anyone to know his name. It was another secret. If we said it in public he would look embarrassed and tell us not to say it again" (Levy, 2004, pp.3–4). He also hides from his family the fact that he has a twin brother who lived in Britain. Angela experiences an epiphany when her father, after a long delay, finally talks to her about his life: "this conversation was brief, but condensed. First, I find I have an uncle in this country. Second, that he's my dad's identical twin and lastly, that he is dead. I had learnt more about my dad in those few minutes than in most of the years that got me to that point" (Levy, 2004, p.237). Beyer believes that "these 'silences' speak of the migrant's difficulties of reconciling cultural and ethnic differences, when the personal and collective histories of the past do not 'translate,' and therefore become unspeakable" (2012, p.108). The parents are prompted to voice their opinion for a second time on the occasion of a visit from Winston's sister. Her husband, a white Scot, inquires, "'So you like it in England then, Winston?' ... 'No regrets about leaving Jamaica?'" (Levy, 2004, p.123). Even if they regretted it, as there is no way back to the Caribbean, he replies "'No, [...] It's good—life is easier—in Jamaica life is hard'" (Levy, 2004, p. 123). The parents find it difficult to assimilate, in contrast to their children.

The title of the book is a metaphor for this assimilation process. The Jacobs do have all the lights in the house burning during the visit until they run out of cash in the gas meter. Embarrassed, they beg their children to bring them out of the darkness and lend them change so that the gas meter can be operated again. Upon his return from work the father normally complains that all the lights in the house are on, and yet, when he wants to show off during his sister's visit, he lets them all burn on purpose. This symbolizes the difference between Britain and the Caribbean: whereas life and living conditions in Britain are shabby and dark, Jamaica is full of light and fresh ocean air. Jamaican society is traditionally matriarchal and, because of the climate, people spend a lot of time on their verandahs and in the streets sharing folklore, stories, and songs, in contrast to people in Britain, who live in a traditionally patriarchal society inside their houses. The Jamaican experience is totally foreign for the children because they have never visited the country of their heritage. The parents, when unable to explain the difference between hot and breezy Jamaica and cold and rainy Britain, resort to the following argument: "you were born here, ... you don't know any different—it's in yer blood" (Levy, 2004, p.122).

Another element foregrounded throughout the novel is racial prejudice. Children from all backgrounds play together in the courtyard without any problems until the Jacobs win a typically British game - rounders. In doing so, they are harassed by their fellow players and face a verbal attack: "Take her back to the jungle ... You come from the jungle—all wogs come from the jungle ... You're not English—my dad said, ... You wanna go back—go back to where you came from—Blackie ... Go on, Blackie—get back to where you came from!" (Levy, 2004, p. 57). At such moments, Angela and her family hesitate about which culture and society they belong to. And yet, because storytelling is not practised in her family, Angela knows little about Caribbean traditions, including storytelling, which she feels should be embedded in collective memory. Beyer quotes Daniel W. L. Lai on the importance of sharing cultural heritage: "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" (2007, p.149). However, there are hardly any references to written texts, which means that the Jacobs do not fit in, they have not assimilated, they are standing in between cultures but belong to neither of them, as the response of the mother to the verbal racial attack her children experienced testifies: "we're not black and we're not white" (Levy, 2004, p. 59). However, the parents in particular have adopted the strategy of unwillingness to stand out in society or to take pride in their heritage - to maintain a low-key lifestyle: "My parents' strategy was to keep as quiet as possible in the hope that no one would know that they had sneaked into this country. They wanted to be no bother at all" (Levy, 2004, p.88). It is Angela, then, who takes on the role of mediator between the cultures; however, she lacks the experience and knowledge of her Caribbean ancestry. For example, she helps her father get medical treatment within the NHS system, which she understands, but with which her father has a problem. She reassures him: "I had asked my dad to rely on me and he'd accepted. I knew this society better than my parents ... I had grown up in its English ways. I could confront it, rail against it, fight it, because it was mine—a birthright" (Levy, 2004, p.88). Angela is determined to find her true position in British society; however, as Susan Alice Fischer points out, "What remains in the end is a daughter's love for her dying father and a sense of her ongoing struggle to find a place for herself. As her father dies, her generation will be the next to define a place for itself in Britain" (2004, p.206). Although Angela functions as a mediator of cultures, she sometimes feels like an outsider herself on account of the colour of her skin. This is exemplified by a scene in Sunday school, where Angela, together with the only other black girl, Ada, is made to stand in front of the rest of the children. They are singled out when the vicar sings:

Jesus loves the little children

All the children of the world

Black and yellow, red and white

All are precious in His sight

Jesus loves the little children of the world. (Levy, 2004, p.146)

The vicar does not know how to deal with racist remarks and he behaves in the worst possible way – instead of integrating Angela and Ada, he pushes them to the periphery of the group.

Angela stands in between not only cultures, but races as well. Angela is neither white nor black. She feels out of place in a hair salon specializing in Afro haircuts. There she overhears Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood speech and cannot grasp the impact of the speech, unlike those who enjoy being in the black beauty salon. Interestingly, Beryl, Angela's mother, experienced similar outsider status in the Caribbean: "Her skin was pale. In Jamaica, they sometimes wouldn't serve her in shops, thinking that she was white, or sometimes she'd get privileged treatment for exactly the same reason" (Levy, 2004, p.7). Beryl never enjoys a privileged position in Britain. Although she is qualified as a teacher, she cannot practise this profession in Britain: "The English wouldn't let her teach. They said she had to retrain before she could stand before English children. My mum didn't have the money to retrain and she then became pregnant, so she took in sewing at home instead" (Levy, 2004, p. 7). She is, however, dedicated to winning back her social status - Beryl "took an Open University degree in Humanities and Social Science. She watched the programmes in the early mornings then went to work to teach 'her' children. At night she went to the shops and bought food" (Levy, 2004, p.8). Such an attitude shows that, unlike her husband, she tries to assimilate and to adapt to the British system.

However, there remains one sphere where the Jacobs cannot contemplate assimilating: food, and their preference for Jamaican cuisine. Njeri Githire, paraphrasing Pierre Bourdieu's argument that taste functions as a unifier and divider between people, similarly believes that taste has the "ability to connect those who belong to similar backgrounds, solely by differentiating them from all others" (2010, p.857). In the Caribbean, cooking belongs among the most important activities within families. Women meet and cook together for hours, sharing tales and news and, therefore, cooking becomes the tradition through which cultural heritage is passed down to the next generation. In this respect, Angela again stands in between cultures. She admits: "I loved school dinners. I looked forward to them every day. My friends didn't. They all screwed up their faces and said, 'Ehh!' a lot and that their mums cooked better things. Nicer. But my mum didn't. She couldn't cook steak and kidney pie with a rich crusty pastry that melted in your mouth ... My mum cooked different things. She boiled rice in coconut with beans. She spiced chicken and meat until it was hot. She fried bananas. Everything she made tasted different" (Levy, 2004, p.45).

To make the search for identity even more complicated, Levy ventures into a discussion of the potential Jewishness of her family. Levy herself has discovered that, although she has Caribbean roots, she is also partly Jewish. By opening this question, she points out the often neglected fact of a fairly large community of Jews in the Caribbean who settled there willingly. In *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, the son of the Jacobs, John, undergoes an identity crisis, which he overcomes by searching for his ancestry. He goes to Jamaica, then he continues to Africa, and, finally, he spends time on a kibbutz in Israel. His quest for identity signifies the complexity of racial and religious categorization within various societies around the globe. The family dream of staying together and moving to a nice house in Britain is postponed for so long that when they move, rather than a dream come true, the effect is a feeling of nostalgia; by then the children have grown up and have started their own adult lives. They are scattered around the world - in Wales, Israel, and New Zealand - a generation that represents the contemporary black Caribbean diaspora in all its extent and richness. In the same way, Andrea Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* stands as a particularly successful example of Caribbean diasporic literature.

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Pavlina Flajsarova (Palacky University Olomouc)

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