Writing Home: Black Writing in Britain Since the War by David Ellis

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Writing Home concentrates on the birth and development of the literature that grew out of the post-War emigrations from the Caribbean to Britain, and as such adds to the growing body of texts that focus on black British writing. David Ellis has set himself the task of 'establish[ing] black British writing as a coherent literary tradition' (xi). He achieves this through recourse to biographical and contextual information and thus his text 'represents a literary and social history of the emergence of black Britain in the second half of the twentieth century' (back cover).

The book is comprehensively divided into three sections (each with its own introduction) dealing with select black British writers with a Caribbean heritage from the first, second and present generation. The foreword offers a conceptual overview of Ellis's study and also addresses some of the problematics associated with the term 'black British'.

Part 1, 'The First Generation', is concerned with what could be defined as the literature of exile. Here Ellis focuses on the writing of Sam Selvon, George Lamming and E.R. Braithwaite, all of whose writing is predominantly targeted towards a white British audience. In the introduction to this section Ellis analyses how, growing up in the British West Indies, a colonial education taught these writers to regard Britain as the "Mother Country". Furthermore, he establishes that when they arrived in Britain as immigrants looking for better prospects, whilst colonialism may have interpellated them into 'the

acceptance of British codes and practices' the host population did not regard them as British (p. 4). Ellis highlights that the fiction of Selvon, Lamming and Braithewaite consequently draws on their experience of exile and Britain's predominantly racist response to black immigrants. In writing home, their texts highlight the 'realities' of immigrant life in Britain, hence challenging colonial myths. The notion of identity is shown to be central to these writers' works since, as Ellis argues, the acceptance of colonial rule resulted in 'the absence of "roots," or recognisable cultural tradition, [which] was most deeply felt when the rejection of the Mother Country left the Caribbean immigrant with no sense of national identity' (p. 7).

With regard to Selvon, Ellis's preoccupation is mainly with the London novels: *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating* since he recognises within them the role of the exile, and 'the unlearning of the image of Britain and the British' in particular (p.10). Ellis rightly observes that in the interests of the immigrant's integration into Britain, Selvon is not so naive as to represent all immigrants as shining examples of honest, hard working citizens, but neither is the indication that they are dishonest, lazy or without morals. Hence Ellis's reading of Selvon's texts offers an analysis of the identity of the exile as it burgeons into a black British identity. *Moses Migrating*, however, is written with a black British audience in mind and Ellis foregrounds how Selvon highlights, through Moses, that once the exile 'has shed his skin in leaving Trinidad,' upon returning he is unable to slip back into that skin (p. 30). Ellis develops further the difficulties related to identity and return in Part 2.

In contrast to Selvon, the work of Lamming is situated within the notion of Nature/Culture. Ellis proposes that 'it is through inverting the popular significance of these terms in racist ideologies that Lamming can wrest the constitution of the West Indian identity

from the dominant perceptions of white society' and further suggests that this opposition can be approached through Lamming's employment of sexuality which also maintains an allegorical import (p. 36). Like Selvon, as an exile Lamming's writing has an educational design. However, Lamming's approach is through the interconnection of the sexual and the political. In this manner, Ellis proposes that Lamming 'redefines the significance attached to the black body by racist ideologies, using the process of fetishism in order to claim not only physical superiority over the whites, but a moral one too' (p. 43).

Braithwaite's *To Sir, With Love* possibly represents the most well known work of fiction about the black experience in Britain and it is this text (and filmic text) that the final section of Part 1 focuses upon. Unlike characters in Selvon's and Lamming's works, Ricky readily identifies with the British upper-class, and his friendship with Gillian portrays him as an integrated figure with none of the issues surrounding the notion of identity raised by Ellis in relation to the previous texts. Ricky conforms to the white Ideal presumably due to the assumption that integration is possible by way of assimilation. Ellis demonstrates how by contrast, the film chooses to reduce the significance of race in favour of teenage rebellion. At the end of Part 1, the conclusion Ellis draws is that for Selvon and Lamming the identity of the exile is limited by the British society within which they live, whereas in Braithwaite's text(s) Ricky's/Mark's position in society is only achievable due to a rejection of any notion of a West Indian identity. As such, Braithwaite's writing is exposed as representing a colonisation of the mind that Lamming in particular is engaged in revealing.

Part 2, 'The Second Generation', covers a period characterised by its continued construction of racist ideologies, the rise of nationalism aided by political parties and race riots. Ellis illustrates how the medium of television also failed to represent the black presence in Britain as normal, and rather contributed further to white racism through the production and screening of programmes such as *Love Thy Neighbour* and *Until Death Do Us Part*. The texts of Andrew Salkey, Wilson Harris and Linton Kwesi Johnson respond to this racist culture through their continued representation of black characters as 'Other' and, Ellis suggests, their response is demonstrated by their political and literary radicalism. Identity remains a preoccupation of the texts under scrutiny in this section since exiles returning to the Caribbean exhibited a foreign identity whilst twenty years of immigration and black presence in Britain had failed to bring about acceptance.

Ellis's concern with regard to Harris is to demonstrate that in rejecting the realist style of writing he was adding a new aspect to the developing body of West Indian literature, instead commencing 'what he [Harris] termed a "cycle of exploration" into the nature of human existence' in order to promote a change to the accepted way of viewing things (p. 77). The main focus is on *Black Marsden* and *The Angel at the Gate*. A preoccupation of Harris's is with the function of the irrational and unconscious upon our existence, which he represents fictionally through the employment of dreams, stream of consciousness and a revision of paintings. Ellis reasons that it is this aspect that is responsible for the much-criticised difficulty of his texts.

Unlike Harris, Salkey's work can be regarded as conforming to the Social Realism tradition in West Indian literature of Mende and James. However, a parallel can be drawn with the work of Harris in that fantasy is also apparent as an aspect of Salkey's construction of

reality. Furthermore, Ellis highlights that as sexuality plays a part in racist ideology/mythology, this is also an apparent element of Salkey's texts. Thus, Ellis argues that it is Salkey's alternative perspective coupled with his experience of emigrant life that makes his work worthy of attention. Ellis's main concern is with *Escape to an Autumn Pavement*, *The Adventures of Catallus Kelly* and *Come Home, Malcolm Heartland*.

Due to the merging of art and rebellion in his work, Johnson can be perceived as an example of an entirely new black British identity to the extent that Ellis suggests he 'must be recognised as a pioneer in black British culture' (p. 103). Ellis thus demonstrates the importance of the theme of solidarity and Rastafarianism to Johnson's work. Attention is given to volumes of poetry and recorded albums comprising *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, *Dread Beat an' Blood* (volumes of poetry), and *Making History*. Ellis draws attention to Johnson's refusal to modify his use of "dialect" since black nationalism exhibited in his performance poetry is written expressly for a black audience who are a part of, and empathise with, the experience of black oppression in Britain. Thus by the end of this section Ellis has successfully demonstrated how black art 'functions as a medium through which the desire for liberation may be communicated to a black population still controlled through white-dominated ideologies' (p. 142).

Part 3, 'The Present Generation' is concerned with a seeming process of assimilation that has occurred, with TV and sports personalities providing a constant and identifiable black British presence. Hence the classification of the work of British born writers Joan Riley, Caryl Phillips and David Dabydeen as twentieth-century British fiction rather than 'Anglophone Literature' in academic libraries is to be regarded as significant. Ellis attributes this

assimilation in art and culture specifically to the growth of a solid independent black press and black women writers' contribution. Caribbean migrants and their offspring are shown, however, to still suffer discrimination, police harassment and social poverty. The work of the writers in this final section is consequently shown to illustrate the concerns of an emergent black British community.

Riley's fiction is written with a black audience in mind. Ellis effectively demonstrates how her work addresses Caribbean patriarchy in Britain and the Caribbean in order to illustrate the embattlement inherent within that community. As a result the Caribbean is shown to be a voice in dialogue with the community in Britain. Regardless of the continued presence of British racism, however, the notion of return is shown to be a romance due to the consciousness of an emergent black British identity.

The sense of displacement and the 'dismissal of return' are also aspects apparent in the work of Phillips (p. 149). Thus Ellis identifies the central problematic of Phillips's work as revolving around the knowledge of the second generation's awareness of white society's refusal to accept them as part of British society coupled with the impossibility of repatriation. Furthermore, through an analysis of his drama and fiction, Ellis efficiently illustrates Phillips's reconsideration of issues related to colonialism. Unfortunately in the section referring to *Higher Ground* an editing error has led to the omission of a small paragraph at the bottom of page 189, which is somewhat confusing. Nevertheless, the conclusion Ellis arrives at is that 'like Riley, his work does not forgo integrity in favour of solidarity, and thus it includes collaborators, hustlers, bigots and fools' (p. 194). A parallel can therefore be drawn here with Selvon, but the important difference is that of the intended audience.

Whilst Riley and Phillips have been criticised for not focusing more on the situation of the black British, and for the negativity surrounding their portrayal of the black male, it is possible to suggest that the black British audience are addressed by both writers in the manner of critical awareness. Dabydeen's writing comprises both creative writing and criticism, hence he 'uses his work to turn that critical tradition onto British society; to similarly re-sense the issues of colonialism, and promote the marginalized figures of the colonial relationship' (p. 194). Ellis's analysis of Dabydeen's work demonstrates his difference in relation to the other writers in that whilst writing for a white audience, Dabydeen's purpose revolves around 'educating white society about itself' (p. 197). In his attempt to educate white Britain about the mythology of colonialism and its legacy, Ellis shows Dabydeen as promoting a creolised British society as the way forward.

In *Writing Home* Ellis thoroughly researches and analyses the work of nine important writers with a Caribbean heritage who detail the emerging, and ultimately the establishment, of black Britain. The notion of writing home is shown to comprise different facets of meaning. Hence, for the first generation it is a literature of reappraisal; for the second generation, writing home constitutes a radicalism born of a continued rejection by the white community; and for the present generation home is seen to be in Britain. However, the final section is maybe somewhat dated to be called 'The Present Generation' as subsequent works by both Phillips and Dabydeen are omitted and neither does it include more recent contributions by writers such as Andrea Levy, Zadie Smith and Diran Adebayo, for example. As I understand it, *Writing Home* is an edited version of Ellis's doctoral dissertation and hence shows its age in both primary materials and critical sources. Having said that, the

book is easy to read, and clearly and comprehensively presented. It could therefore be of use to students and scholars working in a variety of disciplines and interdisciplinary fields such as Literature, English Studies, Contemporary British Politics, and Contemporary British History.