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Writing Reality in a Hostile Environment

Abstract

Race might seem like a strange concept with which to start a paper on literature. But it is also appropriate to the context in which many non- Indigenous people live and work and survive throughout Europe. In Britain as in the rest of Europe, the so-called race question goes deep into the fabric of society, not race in its biological and innocuous meaning, but as an emotive and infinitely manipulable form.

Joan Riley was born in St Mary, Jamaica, and now lives in Britain. Her most recent novel is *A Kindness to the Children*. Her other novels, *The Unbelonging* (1985), *Waiting in the Twilight* (1987) and *Romance* (1988), are all published by The Women's Press.

JOAN RILEY

Writing Reality in a Hostile Environment

Race might seem like a strange concept with which to start a paper on literature. But it is also appropriate to the context in which many non-indigenous people live and work and survive throughout Europe.

In Britain as in the rest of Europe, the so-called *race question* goes deep into the fabric of society, not race in its biological and innocuous meaning, but as an emotive and infinitely manipulable form.

Manipulation of public opinion, however politically or socially shaded depersonalises black peoples and creates acceptance of a set of *truths* which has nothing to do with race. This is a historical phenomena, which meant recent black immigration into Europe, found societies where racism and its resultant prejudices, were totally integrated into existing cultural and social norms.

A great deal of Europe's creative energies in the past few centuries has gone into expunging collective guilt. It was necessary to justify atrocities committed on non-white peoples for economic gain, by creating the myth of inferiority and a sliding scale of humanity.

So when black and Asian peoples started arriving in any numbers, they were already marked...not only by skin colour, but with the stigma of slavery, indentureship and subordinate colonial status.

As immigrants they were convenient scapegoats who were linked in the public mind to undesirable behaviour such as mugging and with social problems such as urban decay.

It was in this climate that creative self-expression struggled to flourish.

The Reality of Existence and Gender.

The development of an indigenous literature based on the experience of black people in Britain is a relatively recent phenomena. Although there are notable exceptions, i.e. Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch*, the black experience in Britain was usually interpreted by 'white' usually sociological parameters.

The practical result of this, has been a tendency to attempt a frame of reference that tied closest to white perceptions and expectations of black

lives, based as it is on the old colonial definitions of superiority and black non-humanity and inferiority.

For Afro-Caribbeans, due to a whole series of historical, economical and political necessities which could not adequately be dealt with here, this has meant being locked into the position of underclass.

There is a saying, that if you want to know a people you should read their literature. If that had been the test of existence, black people and Asians in Britain would have been non-people. Literature was constantly imposed from without and the effort to separate them from their history went on in schools, colleges and society in general.

In the case of Afro-Caribbeans in particular it was almost like the genesis of a new people. Part of a new white created and imposed definition of black, with a forty year existence and no past. Even within this limited definition women came out nowhere. The community was defined in terms of men, and the notorizing of the 'youth'. The idea seemed to be, that men faced oppression, and it was a woman's duty to be understanding. This was of course not unique to Britain. Certainly it was an extension and continuation of the situation brought from the Caribbean. If Afro-Caribbean men had little space for expression in Britain; women seemed to have no place in the black experience. Men defined the black experience, and women were expected to actively work for male freedom before staking a claim for their own.

When I was a young undergraduate, accepted definitions of black women, came out of the perceptions of black men. The works of Afro-American and Caribbean men were often cited as authoritative sources of information about black women, their lives and character. After all, they were black they should know. No one seem to notice the irony. There was little doubt cast on the impartiality of men coming from rigidly patriarchal systems, full of macho stereotypes, yet having to cope with women forced to strength through economic and social necessity. The so-called hierarchy of oppression, in the making then, became more entrenched and accepted and in the following decade.

Allied to this situation was the popular attitude in Britain that the pattern of racial 'co-existence' in the United States was one that any situation of black and white would undergo. There seemed to be an attitude in Britain that the black dimension to available literature was already covered. For what was coming out of America would eventually be true of any western industrial country with a black presence.

That this might be a stereotype never seemed to be a matter of even passing consideration; despite the fact that no one would consider comparing the situation of say, Tamils in Sri Lanka with the Protestants in Northern Ireland. The fact that Afro-Americans were present at the inception of annexion was brushed aside as irrelevant.

There has always been a tendency to confuse, rather than link, the historical developments within the Caribbean basin with that which exist

in the United States. This has been foisted by the common experience of slavery and the traditional migratory tendencies of Caribbean peoples towards the United States. It has also been a comfortable cushioning reality with overtones of inevitability taking away responsibility for a range of injustices from the shoulders of the host community.

The writer of the black reality in Britain must of necessity challenge this perception. This very challenge creates a hostility that pre-disposes towards suppression and condemnation of a literature that creates pain.

The Writer and Responsibility.

As a writer I am responsible only to myself and my conscience. This is a truth which has taken me many years to finally accept. I write from my own perception, and makes no pretence that it is on behalf of anyone. Writing on issues considered to be controversial, means that once published it's too late to apologise for the work, and to justify is to devalue it. Trying to satisfy everyone is to please no one and one becomes very much like the farmer and the donkey in the fable; with a whole series of imposed opinions riding on your back.

Nevertheless, with the the paucity of literature geared to the black experience in Britain, there is a tendency on all sides, to load onto writers' shoulders the responsibility for the collective conscience of a community. Rejection of this role often lead to hostility and the claim that a writer has turned her back on her *roots* or *sold out*. Yet acceptance could put you in an equally untenable position, where ownership of your own thought process is subject to community approval.

To be a black person and a woman, writing in Britain is to tread a thin line. Coming from the Caribbean, yet choosing to write about the lives of ordinary black women in Britain creates certain ambiguities. For many British-born black people it is seen as a marked failure, that much of what is written as a representation of their environment comes from what they would consider non-indigenous people.

Choosing to write about women considered *losers* raises other questions of hostility...both from radical black men, seeing themselves as scapegoated by an unholy alliance of black women and white feminist, and from black feminists, unable to accept the portrayal of weakness as well as strength in black women as an integral part of their essential humanness.

Many in the black community perceive themselves as under siege. They see the negative portrayal of black people, in all media forms, and routinely in formalised social responses. The reaction is to close ranks, to be afraid of frank examination, even if this resistance indirectly aids the process of de-personalisation, which creates lesser values for black lives. The idea of black people portrayed in certain adverse situations, is considered appalling, however disturbing and effective it might be, in

challenging the non-person stereotype. Equally too is the idea of black people portrayed as incorporating bad traits as well as good. Understandable though this resistance is, it creates a difficult climate in certain situations for the writer to find manoeuvring space.

Hostility from the white community is twofold: from white feminists angered that racism is given precedence over what they see as the more important gender issues notably sexism and from the white people in general, because the content of the literature strikes too close to home. It not only points a finger at their unacknowledged and systematic discrimination; but also challenges their comfortable world view.

Of course certain things were difficult to accept, by people of all political persuasions. For instance, the prevalence of racism in Britain, although partially acknowledged has never been acted on as a central factor in combatting the way black children progress through the school system or why and how black people in general are positioned in the socio-economic framework of society. Instead, the success of a small minority is used as the exception, to prove the very opposite of this concept... In this way the oppressed is made to take full blame and responsibility for her/his oppression. For many black writers, this is the first *truth* that they stumble across early in the exposure of their creative output.

Colour like poverty seem to have become more and more another facility for the rich. In the same way as one would go to the theatre, and give to charity, one could also take on anti-racism; without varying perception or behaviour one iota.

Everybody read the black American writers and were moved, *but at least it couldn't happen in Britain. Issues around the Caribbean and African could be taken aboard.* After all these were independent places, and their problems were because of their own incompetence, (not the legacy of centuries of exploitation) and so Britain was left with clean hands.

It's hardly surprising that the only authors writing in Britain, deemed worthy of notice, were those who concentrated on *elsewhere*, or wrote in the terms of the transient. One wonders if this might not be due to the British reluctance to come to terms with the existence of a settled permanent black presence. Racism against black people could be coped with, when not articulated, or so long as it came over that it was an extreme minority, and the majority were benevolent and tolerant.

Literature from the Caribbean is considered *safe*; but still by and large irrelevant to the real lives of black children growing up in Britain. Accepted wisdom is that, they live in Britain so they should accept and learn about Britain forgetting that this is what they've been doing in Caribbean schools for generations. The idea seems to be that Afro-Caribbean children must learn to co-exist so long as this means the eradication of who they are and the history which has brought them to where they are.

Images of the Caribbean, despite a rich body of literature to the contrary remain that of a rural, 'backward' place, full of ignorant easy-going and illiterate people, with little ambition and less morals.

Education policy seemed to consider it necessary to separate (what was termed) the British black from any comparison with the media defined quaint backwardness and simplicity of the Caribbean and bumbling savagery of Africa. This happened at a time, when black American writers were beginning to enjoy a great deal of popularity in Britain and the parallels with the American ghettos were immediately obvious. The fact that differences might also have existed, was something that was never taken on board; for a part of British perception of black as negative - whether it be in the role of victim, sly criminal or savage destroyer - had been shaped by the way urban black communities in America were portrayed in both print and electronic media. So long as it did not challenge this perception, black literature was a comfortable *right on* thing to read. It was only when black writing was about the British backyard, that it started to get uncomfortable.

The Dilemma.

Many black writers often feel trapped between a variety of warring factions. There is constant pressure to justify and apologise for the written text; and equally 'to conform' the next book, the next story the next time. The creative process becomes a constant struggle, not to shy away from honest opinion in the interest of approval. The role of the writer in society is an ever present topic, obscuring issues, which I would consider crucial. These include issues such as the lack of an independent and representative black critique, one which surveys black works in its own context and on its own terms. This is not, I hasten to add, a plea for dual standards of literature, only one where adherence to eurocentric values are not a precondition for the label, *excellent*.

Too often good works are stifled from view, because the reviewer is unable to step outside narrow prejudices and cultural confines. Others because sadly, the critical appraisal lacks the open honesty of the work in question; and hides behind platitudes such as impartiality, and the equally absurd idea that art can be divorced from cultural and social contexts. In many cases, criticisms show a lack of familiarity with the content of the book, doing little credit to either the author or reviewer.

Finally: The Ending.

In my own creative process, there is an ongoing struggle to create a breathing space. It is important to represent my perceptions as clearly and honestly as I can. Yet I would be dishonest if I did not admit to being

disturbed by the levels of hostility I have often received from certain quarters.

My initial reaction to hostility, apart from disbelief, was to withdraw as fast as possible into privacy. This was followed by a long process of self-examination, and a struggle to understand what was expected of me, and more importantly, if I, as a writer, really had a burden of responsibility to all these various factions; many of whom, I hadn't even know existed. Creating is a private process, and like many writers without a literary background, I was ill-prepared and resentful of the glare of public scrutiny which followed it. It is a dilemma I have seen time and again in writers, presented in many forms, and it is one which is intensified by the complex, secretive nature of guilt in British social life.

I have long come to terms with the expectation that my work will be criticised for the sake of criticism with one theme in the book, elevated out of context to provide fuel for unconstructive, and destructive attacks, on both book and author. This is by no means a unique experience. Black writing remains a novelty, and black writing without a happy ending raises issues of guilt and resentment.

My own perception of what my work sets out to do often mitigates against any kind of happy ending. This is not because I am an unremittingly gloomy individual; quite the contrary in fact.

On the other hand my view of creativity demands a high level of involvement. As a result I feel happy endings in much of my work, would be a betrayal of the community of women who give unstintingly of their lives to flesh my creative world. A sop to the, *I'm alright generation*, who make up so much of the readership of works like mine.

At the end of the day, for someone to close the book on conflicts resolved, is for them to close out the world of endless struggle, disappointments, bad housing, raw deals, that continue to be the daily lives of many millions of people. It is also for me to be providing, from the struggle of a community, a voyeur's view, safe, tidy and packaged as just another digestable, environmentally polluting commodity, to go with the television dinners and no deposit bottles. To allow my readers to retreat back to their comfortable world and not accept their collective part in solving the issues that did not go away with the final full stop would be to have failed in achieving the purpose of the work.

Writing a reality out of step with perception carries a high emotional and intellectual price. Yet not to do so is to deny the possibility that eventually, perceptions and reality can move closer together. As a writer I do not claim to be able to change society. Certainly, I have never pretended to have any answers or possibilities for resolving the human condition. Granted there are questions, uncomfortable questions. But questions which create debate, however hostile, keep a normally hidden reality uncovered and raises the possibility of change.