



IDENTITY IN THE MULTICULTURAL STRUGGLE IN BRITAIN

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Abstract

In *Wicked World* the poet x-rays some of the major challenges facing multicultural Britain. In his quest for a genuine multicultural society he argues for freedom of cultural expression, cultural justice, a just representation of cultural traits and the need for resistance. The poet's multicultural conviction leads him to take advantage of the multicultural history of Britain which he uses as a springboard to the society's cultural strictness. His goal is to liberate other cultural traits and habits within the multicultural British society that has long suffered from exclusion and bareness of cultural freedom. His poetry thus brings to mind multicultural complexities that stand to represent a multicultural change in Britain. As a result, Zephaniah exposes his intent to unearth the concealed truth about the illusion of Britain's conservative cultural authenticity that has typified her cultural existence especially in the contemporary British society. He does not however project a vision of a plausible multicultural change in future, without believing that such hopes are void of a ceaseless determined struggle.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Cultural Identity, Ethnicity

Identity is what makes a person different or a group of people different from others. The issue of multicultural complexities in Britain is rooted in identity. It is critical because many believe they are losing who they are as a person and as a group within the national culture. Benjamin Zephaniah in his poetry brings out an understanding of the importance of the struggle because people's identities are at stake. His interest is tilted towards individual identities as well as collective identities. Zephaniah is convinced that integration of these identities is undeniable but they feel unofficial because the multicultural history of the country seems to exclude them. Also, identity is a feature of any culture that helps to identify them amidst other cultures. From the Cultural Studies perspective this paper focuses on identity as key to any culture and the importance it deserves in a multicultural complex environment, especially Britain.

Multiculturalism is a concept that has represented Britain's growing, mix different races over the past years, and this multiplicity of cultures is certainly playing a large role in characterising Britain's identity. Identity is an important concept that keeps growing in its debate because people keep searching for true identities. According to Cultural Studies critics, Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe in their book, *Discourse and Identity*, the postmodern view of identity within the context of multiculturalism, has challenged the idea of group identity because to them it emphasises on concepts such as migration, and diaspora as cultural groups. Rather Zephaniah shows that any cultural group deserves their cultural rights. The poem "Hongi" appreciates cultural tolerance:

If you've just arrived from Belgium
And you have friends in New Zealand,

You should know that friendly Maoris
Wants to Hongi.

It don't matter where you come from
It's a most respectful welcome,
You see every friendly Maori
Wants to Hongi. (2)

In the first stanza above, the poet talks about Maori a cultural group in New Zealand and their cultural trait. In the same stanza he talks about the Maori People's greeting called "Hongi". He says that Belgian people are welcomed in New Zealand especially for those who have friends there. This implies that the Maori people are friendly people. In the second stanza he announces that Maori people are very friendly people because they welcome everybody in a respectful way.

Zephaniah in the above poem celebrates the cultural group Maori in New Zealand because they are culturally receptive. He draws a remarkable example from this community to show that immigrant and diaspora cultural group identities can be tolerated. His biographical experiences shows that he travelled a lot and probably influenced by that to write the way he does. He probably experienced the Maori culture of Hongi from the way he speaks.

Zephaniah's poetry shows that British multicultural complexities is as a result of lack of the kind of culture the Maori people practice. Panikos Panayi in his book, *An Immigration History of Britain: Multicultural Racism Since 1800*, shows that the immigrant cultural group constitutes the bigger part of Britain. According to Panayi ethnic minorities tended to originate from former colonies like India, Jamaica, Nigeria and many unmentioned former colonies, tracing the existence of multiculturalism which was unvoiced during the pre-war era but voiced during the period after war. That is, groups of people who had connection to the Empire and in many cases English-speaking integrated because of their newly acquired status. He informs that the immigrants were scattered across the city in apparently unsystematic ways. Panayi deepens the understanding of what Zephaniah's poetry expresses that these cultural groups have been part

of the British community a long time ago and feel belonging, in the poem "Whosland":

At dawn one morn
After eight weeks of sailing,
The Europeans landed
On the gold, sandy beach.

After praying
They made their way
Inland,
With their flags in their hands
And an empire on their minds.

Soon they came across a small village,
All the people came out to see them,
The villagers thought they had come with
great
knowledge
And wisdom from afar.
Having never seen Europeans before
This was new and exciting.

When the captain of the ship
Met the elder of the village
He still had a flag in his hand
And an empire on his mind.

'What did you call this land before
we arrived?'
Said the captain.
'Ours'
Said the village elder,
'Ours' (10)

In the first stanza, the poet describes an Island that it is sandy. He talks about the Europeans that they took eight weeks sailing in their boat to reach this Island in the morning of the eighth day. He says that at the shore, the Europeans prepared themselves to penetrate the land that was ahead of them with prayers. The persona explains their intentions that they were coming to conquer the land and spread their empire. In the village the persona says the villagers were excited to see these people because they had never seen them before. For their expectation, the persona says they expected knowledge and wisdom that had come from a far strange land. He was still surprised that

the welcome the villagers gave these Europeans did not change their minds because they still had in theirs to conquer them and spread their empire. The Europeans directly asked what the villages called the land before their arrival. The elder of the village replied him "Ours". This meant a friendly village.

Zephaniah in the above poem shows when and how the immigration in Britain started and how Africa, Asia and the Caribbean had been part of the multicultural history of the country. In spreading their empire, they conquered territories and in return had slaves that were going to work in their plantations abroad. Zephaniah believes this resettlement of the colonised meant penetration of other cultures in the British community. In the last line of the poem, Zephaniah uses the pronoun "ours" which indicates sharing. This shows the pure communist mindset Africans had and the capitalist minds of the Europeans.

This debate of multiculturalism is an issue that scholars have been pulling from various ends, that is, from the anti-multiculturalists wing and the multiculturalists' wing with diverse opinions as a result of the complexity of the environment. Benjamin Zephaniah, a contemporary multicultural British poet has on his part, put forth his own views on cultural identity, which captures every identity.

Individual and collective identities in defining their identity must be able to differentiate themselves by drawing on a criterion of commonality and a sense of shared belonging within their shared group. What individuals and collective groups consume as cultural production within a society binds their cultural identity. According to Zephaniah, this is especially identified when people widely share cultural structures that exist beyond interpersonal specification and ties. In the poem "The British", he states:

Sprinkle some fresh Indians, Malaysians,
Bosnians,
Iraqis and Bangladeshis together with some
Afghans, Spanish, Turkish, Kurdish, Japanese
And Palestinians
Then add to the melting pot.

Leave the ingredients to simmer.

As they mix and blend allow their languages
to flourish

Binding them together with English. (38)

In the first stanza above, the persona starts with a metaphor when he uses the word 'Sprinkle' to describe different cultural groups. He says that these cultural groups with different cultural traits should be combined in a 'melting pot'. This melting pot metaphorically stands for Britain. He describes these different cultural identities as 'ingredients' and gives a recipe for multicultural integration. The persona suggests that these cultural identities should be given cultural freedom. As they mix and encounter each other, their cultural identities should flourish together with the English identity.

Hence, the point at which binds their consumption therefore constitutes that useful transparent glass through which understanding of membership in the belonging of a mass cultural shared ties. Cultural identity becomes a connection point between where a culture defines its people and how the people themselves think they share those ties in that culture. The tension of multicultural complex British environment is as a result of the urge to connect with the entire community especially on how they feel and connect with each other.

According to Ellis Cashmore, in his book, *Encyclopedia of Race and Ethnicity*, "Cultural identity, in its sense, is a stable, consistent feature that unifies people, particularly during periods of struggle." (95) This view points out the fact that marginalised or sidelined subordinate classes have solidify social ties that binds them as a result of multicultural complex atmosphere they are in. Zephaniah's poetry expresses that these identities struggling for their recognition in history, are obscured by the mainstream culture. Cash further explains that how these cultural identities are represented has been part of setting up and continuing the sense of unity among individuals and collective groups.

In an edited book by Houston Jr. A.Baker et al. *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, a Cultural

Studies critic, Stuart Hall in his essay, "Cultural Identity And Cinematic Representation", says identity is a "production", which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation." (210) He also further explains that, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past." (213) This assertion throws more light on the fact that, identity does not have a fix definition because it keeps changing. This opinion is clear in Zephaniah's poem "The British":

Remove the Romans after approximately 400 years

Add lots of Norman French to some

Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Vikings, then stir vigorously.

Mix some hot Chileans, cool Jamaicans, Dominicans,

Trinidadians and Bajans with some Ethiopians,

Chinese, Vietnamese and Sudanese. (38)

In the first stanza, the persona talks of the different cultural identities that penetrated Britain. This stanza identifies different groups before the pre-war times. In the second stanza, the poet brings in other different cultural identities. These groups are in the post-war era. Put together, these cultural identities change the British culture.

Zephaniah further shows that the authenticity and authority claimed by British cultural identity becomes problematic because of this opinion on "identity". Stuart Hall defines "cultural identity" as "the idea of one, shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self," hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves," which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common." (211) The insight to the understanding of the above mentioned opinion is that collective identity is born on the mutual historical experiences and shared cultural values which provide a particular group of people as "one people". One people who are unique no matter the cultural complexities within their community.

Sharing the same view with Hall, Zephaniah in his poetry lays emphasis on the importance of "oneness," especially when the "other" is recognised. Drawing from the Apache cultural group, Native Americans, in "Before All These Cities" Zephaniah appreciates the cultural recognition within this community:

We brave Apache once lived on the plains
Under the hot sun where it hardly rains,
We fought all those who came to steal our territory
That is why we are called the brave Apache.
(3)

In the above stanza, the persona talks of their past history as Apache people. He describes that they lived in the desert where the land was plain and barely had rains. He expresses in his tone the spirit of unity that existed within their community. The persona explains that this spirit of unity made them to protect their land when the colonisers came to colonise their territory.

The Apache people fought and protected their cultural territory and identity from colonisers. Zephaniah through this poem is concerned with "cultural identity" protection, which the British society lacks. Zephaniah throughout this poem uses the pronoun "we" to show the cultural ties that the "Apache" people possess through their identity, as they are able to identify, acknowledge each other and share a common truth and essence. Hall further shares in his opinion that "such a conception of cultural or national identity played a critical role in all the postcolonial struggles which have so profoundly reshaped our history." (211) This claim posits the struggles of the transformation of the multicultural process in Britain by revolutionary poets like Benjamin Zephaniah. Cultural Studies critics are interested in the practical ideas that bring human right and progression in their existence. This is to say that the struggles of revolutionary poets like Zephaniah fall within the interest of cultural critics as they share a common course. Cultural Studies continue to be that creative force in emergent forms of representation so far within the marginalised people in Britain. This is because the multicultural beliefs and struggles of contemporary British

multiculturalists fall within that scope. One of the aspects that stir multicultural complexity which Zephaniah projects in his poetry is the lack of respect of other cultural identities and their values. He emphasises the need for this "In Indonesia" when he says:

In Indonesia
There are Moslems and Hindus
In Indonesia
There are Buddhists and Sikhs
In Indonesia
There's more than three hundred tribal
groups
Using just as many different ways to speak.
(14)

In the above stanza, the poet brings out different cultural identities in Indonesia. He uses repetition to emphasise on what he is saying. The persona says that in Indonesia there are more than three hundred cultural groups that use different languages to communicate.

In the whole poem Zephaniah enumerates different types of cultural groups that exist in this community. The interesting thing is, he is much concerned with the diversity of the Indonesian culture. He says that to earn the Indonesian cultural identity one needs to learn some of their few words. Its cultural variety brings the multicultural beauty and uniqueness in their cultural experience. They find a common ground to identify themselves with their varied cultural experiences. "Eating long grain rice and voicing their opinions" (14) is a cultural trait that stands as a common ground for the different cultural identities in Indonesian. Zephaniah uses this community to show that it can be possible in contemporary multicultural complex British community. As earlier mentioned the biographical experiences of the author in Birgitta Danielsson's article entitled, "Non-standard Language Use in Performing Poetry: A Linguistic Study of Benjamin Zephaniah's Propa Propaganda", probe into Zephaniah's life saying, "His parents separated when he was in secondary school which led to him and his mother constantly moving." (4) This probably explains why his poetry, *Wicked World*, is the real world tour of poems about people and places,

cultures and nationalities across the planet. Zephaniah as a widely travelled poet is influenced by the cultural identities of many groups that inspire his writings. In the poem "Very Mongolian", he uses the Mongolian cultural group as an idle culture with uniqueness in its cultural identity:

In Mongolia they have circular homes
That are made of dark timber,
This type of house is moveable
It's what is known as a ger,
And at the centre of the ger
A hole will let in light,
But when i tried to build one
I just couldn't get it right.

Most people in Mongolia
Will own a big warm goat,
And many wise Mongolians
Are humans, sheep and goats,
Mongolian's the kind of place
Where everyone is cool,
And the things that animals leave behind
Are used each day as fuel. (9)

In the first stanza the persona talks about the Mongolia people. He says that their houses are made up of blanks and not cement. The persona explains that this kind of houses can be carried from one place to the other. He explains that these people are very close with nature because at the centre of their houses there is a hole at the ceiling that allows light to penetrate in the house. He is referring to the sun and the moon. In the last line, the persona confesses that the simplicity of these people cannot be practice by everybody. He says he tried building a similar house but he could not succeed. In the second stanza, he expresses the cosmic harmony in this environment. Both the people and animals are equals. He says that this community has succeeded in respecting nature. Nature is important to them as well as the humans are. Animals save as a source of great energy to them. The animals' waste is their fuel. Meaning they use this for their farms as manure and even for fire or other needs.

Mongolia is a vast region in Asia including the Mongolian People's Republic and China's Inner Mongolia. The cultural identity of these people

inspires Zephaniah to be curious about the benefits of sharing values and which eventually leads to his struggles in the transformation of the multicultural process in Britain. The circularity of the Mongolian homes show the cultural ties which can be difficult to break. Zephaniah is concerned with the “oneness” that makes the “other” recognised thereby bringing in a cultural identity which is difficult to be broken. Benjamin with this influence thinks of a multicultural Britain whose cultural identity can be “rediscovered” by re-looking at how circular the British “homes” can be. The rediscovery of these cultural identities within Britain is not that kind of identity grounded in archaeology but in the “retelling” of the British history that can favour the “new people” that has altered its history. Drawing inspiration from Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, a Cultural Studies critic, makes a case that:

The rediscovery of this identity is often the object of what Frantz Fanon once called a “passionate research . . . directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others.” (211)

This assertion reiterates Zephaniah’s ideology on cultural identity as an aspect of multiculturalism in that, he is against the British mainstream culture which is satisfied with subverting other cultures only to empty their brains in all form and content. The “Conservative Britain” with their dominant cultural practice only oppresses, distorts, disfigures and destroys other cultural identities within Britain. Zephaniah believes that the mainstream culture can recognise other cultures from their values portrayed through their cultural identities. If this is done, it can be a contributing factor in the transformation of the multicultural process in Britain.

However, Zephaniah brings out other cultural traits like dressing and language that better gives cultural identities of people. He is also concerned that the mainstream culture constantly pushes these traits. Zephaniah is concerned with how these

traits can survive. The following lines from the “Variety is the Spice” show different dressing code:

I've seen some dressed in lightning white
I've seen some dressed in orange robes,
I've seen some dressed dark as the night
In hats and European clothes,
My friend wears shalwar and chemises
With more colours than rainbows on
And I have seen many Jain priests
Who dress to not hurt anyone. (26)

In the above stanza, the persona describes different dressing codes. He says some people dress with black and white colours, others with orange colour gowns and some dress completely black from hair to shoe. The persona says some dress according to the European dressing codes with hats. His own personal friend dresses with the French dressing code. In the last line she says that even monks have their own dressing style. Just as the title of the poem suggests, the persona celebrates different cultural dressing codes that gives different cultural identities of a people within a single community.

In the above extract, individual identities are brought out through different dressing codes which matter in a multicultural environment like Britain. It is this individual identities that combine to form a cultural identity of a multicultural environment like that of Britain. The concern of multiculturalism which is the respect for the equality of the coexistence of other cultures in a given community becomes questionable in the British context with its dominant cultural practice. Zephaniah in the above poem, unearths the change in British dressing culture which has altered their cultural identity, “from ‘what they really were’ to what history has intervened in - ‘what they have really become’ ” (213) as Stuart Hall observes in “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation”. This is the reality in the transformation of multicultural process which Conservative Britain has been adamant to accept, rather declares the death of multiculturalism and causes a multicultural complex environment. According to Hall, it is difficult to talk for very long with “any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity,’ without acknowledging its other side - the

differences and discontinuities which constitute, precisely” the British “uniqueness.” (212)

On the other hand, Zephaniah uses language as a cultural trait to express the cultural identities within Britain. Graeme Turner a Cultural Studies critic defines language in his book, *British Cultural Studies*, that:

Language is a signifying system that can be seen to be closely ordered, structured, and thus can be rigorously examined and ultimately understood; conversely, it is also a means of ‘expression’ that is not entirely mechanistic in its functions but allows for range of variant possibilities. (337)

The idea expressed in the above quotation is that language is not a “fix” production. It is a system that is affected by different possibilities. The definition of language is important at this juncture because, language is said to be a carrier of culture. Language is one of the major traits of cultural identity. Turner also states that cultures are not only there for fancy but a site where meaning is generated and experienced. Culture permits the production of social realities to be well constructed, experienced and interpreted. This is partly done through language. The English language has been one of the most important factors in holding the Conservative British community. Zephaniah as a subversive contemporary British multiculturalist is concerned with every cultural traits that need to be considered in British multiculturalism. In the poem “I Luv Me Mudder” Zephaniah uses the dialect of the Jamaican people to celebrate cultural freedom:

I luv me mudder an me mudder luv me
We cum so far from over de sea,
We heard dat de streets were paved wid gold
Sometimes it’s hot, sometimes it’s cold,
I luv me mudder an me mudder loves me
We try fe live in harmony
Yu might know her as Valerie
But to me she’s just my mummy. (76)

In the stanza above, the persona tells us that he is a Jamaican in a different land. He uses the Jamaican dialect to express mutual love between him and his mother. He says that he loves his mother and his mother loves him too. From his speech, they

have travelled a long way to be in their present environment. He describes that the area is a developed because the roads are well constructed and the area has a beautiful weather. The people witness summer and winter which indicates they are abroad. He emphasises that he loves his mother and his mother loves him too. He ends by saying that other people may in the community call his mother by name but he knows she is his mother. The persona at the last line reveals their true setting. He indicates that they are in Britain. He switches from the Jamaican dialect to the British dialect. In the above poem, Zephaniah considers the different cultural traits that exist in multicultural Britain especially language. He starts with the Jamaican cultural identity that he has, and the British cultural identity which he also embraces. He celebrates cultural freedom in the style he uses by bringing in both dialects.

Language itself is culture and it is at the same time used to describe what culture is. Hall states that, “cultural identity . . . is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being.” (212) The kind of tense he uses is present continuous tense. This indicates that cultural identities of people keep changing. Who you finally become is the cultural identity which you acquire and it is not static but rather a continuous process (being). This means that cultural identities do not appear on their own but they have histories. They undergo a historical transformation. The English language helps explain the acquisition of British cultural identity and the language in itself is a cultural trait. Zephaniah does not stop at that, rather he is also concerned with the evolution of English language that is also part of its cultural identity. The history and development of English language has shown the transition of the language affected by other cultures. It is not void of Zephaniah’s multicultural concerns.

Zephaniah advocates for a transformed contemporary multicultural British society in all cultural traits. Braj Kachru’s theory of “Three Circles Model of World Englishes”, shows the structures that the English language has taken in the world. John Robert Schmitz in his article, “Looking under Kachru’s Three Circles Model of World Englishes: The Hidden Reality and Current Challenges”,

underscores Kachru's views in which he sees the world as divided into different circles. He further explains Kachru's Three Circles Model. The "inner circle" which represents the traditional bases of English where English in some countries is native language. The "outer circle" consist of "a large speech community with great diversity and distinct characteristics" and the last part of the circle, the expanding circle, "English is an international language." This model shows the development and continuity of the world "English language" and at the same time carves out the "Conservative" British status. The infiltration of other cultures in the postwar British multicultural society, fall within the "outer circle" of Kachru's English language model. The diversity in English language as adopted by Kachru's second English language model is one of the struggles multiculturalists like Zephaniah advocate for. This also contributes to the shift in cultural identity through its language that multiculturalists in Britain see as reality but history seems to exclude it. The New Englishes in Britain affects its conservative status.

Contemporary British multiculturalists like Zephaniah adopt these ideas in the transformation of the multicultural British society. Through his poetry, Zephaniah indicates the presence of other "mother tongues" from former colonies as nurtured British citizens have affected the language culturally. In "Jamaican Summers", he brings in the new tongues:

Jamaican summers are so hot,
But all over Jamaica
People walk around saying
Dis is cool
Dat is cool
She is cool
Or he's so cool. (81)

In the above stanza, the persona describes the Jamaican environment. He says that the period is summer when the weather is bright. He describes this period that there exist a communal spirit among the inhabitants of this area. He uses both the Jamaican and English dialects to celebrate his cultural freedom.

In conclusion however, British cultural authenticity is seen to be unrealistic especially in a contemporary world that encounters globalisation. From the Cultural Studies perspective, this paper has attempted to explain the juxtaposition of cultures within this society that has disproved its cultural claim of authenticity. Its failure to let go of the cultural claim has continued to be like a collapsed dogma. This is because of the determination of contemporary British proponents to bring forth a change multicultural British society. The contemporary British multiculturalists, to an extent embrace and encourage the resistance of subordinate cultures as another way to bring change in the multicultural complex environment they are in.

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