

## **BHABHA'S AMBIVALENCE AND HYBRIDITY IN ANDREA LEVY'S *THE LONG SONG***

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### **Abstract**

The theory of hybridity and ambivalence is not something that is alien to the postcolonial world. First derived from power relations between the colonizer and the colonized, it has now evolved into many different branches. What is understood from it is that it shows that the relationship between those who hold power and those who are under the rule of a people is never clear-cut. It is a give and take relationship and gives many illusions as to how one views the other. Cross-cultural relations are definitely very complex and we can see this in *The Long Song*. We are always creating new identities as the world becomes more and more globalized. The notion that a culture has to remain unadulterated is a concept that is almost irrelevant. We are constantly creating new identities to help us cope with the different experiences that we have and once we are exposed to it, our way of thinking can never go back to the original. In this paper, I will draw a connection between July's belonging, identity, and her ability to connect with the many people in her life, from her Mistress Caroline to Massa Robert Goodwin and later, her son and other black or Mulatto people, to the theory on ambivalence and hybridity by Homi Bhabha. At the end of the paper, one will be able to articulate that, given the history of Jamaica, the traits that many postcolonial subjects display go hand in hand with Bhabha's theories on ambivalence and hybridity. The discourse on postcolonial subjects, even more recent ones, has shown a tendency to correlate with the experiences of their predecessors such as those who were colonized.

**Keywords:** Hybridity, Ambivalence, *The Long Song*, Jamaica, Postcolonial

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Slavery in Jamaica was around for a very long time before it was abolished. Jamaica was famous for its sugar trade in the 1800's and this was why many slaves were brought in, to help in the sugarcane plantations. Many of the slaves were brought in from West Africa. Jamaica was first conquered by the Spanish in the 14th century and then in the 17th century it was taken over by the British. Many of the slaves started rebelling openly and demanded their freedom in the 19th century and were finally granted emancipation in 1834. It is very important, to first understand the history of Jamaica, before delving into literary analysis because only then can one fully appreciate Levy's book.

With the colourful history of Jamaica due to the various colonizers leaving their marks and also the culture of the slaves mixing with the colonizer's culture, one can clearly understand why *The Long Song* is a good representation of the condition of the slaves. It is clear that even after the abolishment of slavery, there were still many problems plaguing Jamaica. There were many cases where the white owners of the plantations did

not comply with the ruling made, and more or less still forced their slaves to stay with them and work for them because they claimed that they were paying for the lodging and welfare of the slaves, although they were supposed to be free. This is elaborated on by Ingraham, who explains how apprenticeship, which is what slavery was called now, caused the plantation owners more difficulties. He further elaborates that "...all too often the owners chose to ignore the new laws. The planters made no effort to change conditions on the plantations. Getting new equipment and creating better working conditions were out of the question" (n.d.).

This is clearly depicted in *The Long Song* and is perhaps the main reason for July's many sufferings post the abolishment of slavery. When reading the book, the sufferings are revealed. However, July seems to be very candid in her narration does not make the reader feel uncomfortable. It is amazing how July overcomes the obstacles set in her path. Not once does she display any weakness. This is why most of my analysis is on July, with an inclusion of those whom she deals with in the novel, mainly Caroline and her relationship with Robert Goodwin. This analysis will be based on the concept of identity and belonging, where July has to be strong and accept the position she is in, all whilst developing an identity that allows her to get through life with the many different people that she has to deal with, the whites, blacks and also the in-betweens (Mulattos). Homi Bhabha's theory on hybridity and ambivalence will be used to in connection to July's development of identity and behavioural changes.

## 1.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The theory of hybridity and ambivalence was first derived from power relations between the colonizer and the colonized. It has now evolved into many different branches. What is understood from it is that it shows that the relationship between those who hold power and those who are under the rule of a people is never clear cut. It is a give and take relationship and gives many illusions as to how one views the other. The term 'postcolonial', does not just mean the period after colonial rule has ended, it has now extended into the understanding of effects of colonization on descendants of the colonized and the colonizer.

Edward Said, one of the leading researchers in the postcolonial world, has controversially claimed in his book, *Orientalism* (1995), that many in the western world have misused the representation of the Orient and that the effects of colonization are still ongoing and it is infuriating how oppression of the Eastern people is still practiced and this is all due to the lack of understanding of the people of the orient, who are shown as uncivilized (1995). This stereotype of the people of the orient seems to not have changed since the days of the colonizer and this is what Said says is very unfair and unjustified. There are some, like Muravchik (2013), who lay claim that Said seems to have made western and eastern relations worse with his theory because he had an agenda which was politically motivated. Although there are many critics who say that Said has made things worse with his theories, but I feel that he is, to a certain extent, very much right, because the negative effects of colonisation are still very plain to see, and this cannot be disregarded.

*The Long Song* has had many reviews, which were mostly positive and many agreed that it was an accurate presentation of the sequence of events. Levy's Jamaican heritage plays a big part in the way that she writes. Kyte (2010) reviews that Lecy's writing is such that she can confront serious matters and somehow make it light enough for everyone to enjoy. Muñoz-Valdivieso (2016, p.47) comes to a conclusion in her research paper that narrative elements that Levy uses in this novel reminds the viewer why British slavery should not be forgotten and how it can help to contribute to a larger sense of comradeship in modern-day Britain. Jana Gohrisch (2015) speaks about the way Levy uses many literary devices to not only the conditions the slaves lived in, but also how they managed to build their lives.

## 1.2 CONCEPT

In this paper, I will draw a connection between July's belonging and identity and her ability to connect with the many people in her life, from her Mistress Caroline to Massa Robert Goodwin and later, her son and other black or Mulatto people, to the theory on ambivalence and hybridity by Homi Bhabha. These concepts are very important because July is displayed to have a personality that is able to adapt to so many different types of people and circumstances. This is put very eloquently by Andrea Stuart (2011), who in her review of *The Long Song* says that, "*The Long Song* is simultaneously the life-affirming story of one woman's battle to survive in terrible circumstances, and a tribute to the legions of slaves who did more than suffer and die, but also managed to squeeze all they possibly could out of the bleakest of circumstances."

Homi Bhabha's book, *The Location of Culture*, seems to have touched on a great many concepts that extend on Edward Said's works. He claims that ambivalence is a process where the colonizer looks at the colonized as both backward and exotic, and the colonized looks at the colonizer as both fortunate and symbol for

injustice. Furthermore, he also displays how hybridity is also prevalent in postcolonial societies due to the interlocking of many cultures. It is almost impossible to separate two or more cultures from mixing because human nature is such that culture cannot remain locked in the past

On the other hand, Sawant (2011) mentioned that some critics of postcolonial theories argue that these theories simply pander to colonialism. He details that they tend to have this idea because it can become a form of self-imposed colonialism, even though the colonisers are long gone.

However, these postcolonial subjects' will to survive is explored because whilst it can be common for a slave to either fade into the background of the household or to rebel which will lead to imprisonment or death, July has developed a character which has allowed her to express herself and not just become a run of the mill slave who can be bullied into submission.

## **2. ANALYSIS**

### **2.1 JULY**

To begin with, July's birth and childhood leaves nothing to the imagination when she tells us how she was born. July was the product of the rape of her mother, a black plantation worker by the plantation's white overseer, Tam Dewar. This was apparently very common in those days and these women had nowhere to go so they just bore it and many children were born of rapes. There are 2 versions of July's birth and both are just as brutal. Childbirth is definitely one of the most painful times in a woman's life, and July's mother, Kitty, is described as giving birth to her in a shed with the overseer smacking her and telling her shut up. In the other version, she gives birth to July in a plantation and goes right back to work (Levy, 2010, p.12).

July describes her birth in these 2 ways on purpose because she wants us to understand this aspect of her character, which is very candid and takes what life hands to her head on. No matter which way she was born, it was equally as brutal as the other. Moving on, we read about how July, as a 9 year old, was cruelly separated from her mother. Miss Caroline Mortimer, who is the sister of the plantation owner, is enamoured by the young July and is told to take her in as a house slave. Caroline christens July as Marguerite because she felt July wasn't a suitable name. However, July never let on that she did not like this name. Although July does not explicitly state that she hates the name, the reader can notice this by seeing that July never refers to herself as Marguerite.

This is where July perhaps starts to develop her adaptive personality towards her mistress. Bhabha's theory on ambivalence helps to explain this personality because it is how this has split July's personality into two – a culture that July knows is hers alone and another that is the fantasy of her mistress'. She knows not to destroy this fantasy because she knows that if she does rebel, she will be made into a plantation slave, and this is definitely harder than being a house slave. July is intent on not getting into Caroline's bad books and the other house slave knows this and is not happy with Caroline. "July had robbed Molly of easy work...from a filthy nigger child...into the favoured lady's maid..." (p.58).

However, we also see moments where July is definitely more than happy to silently rebel. It is plain to see during the Christmas dinner where Miss Caroline wants to show off an expensive tablecloth to the other white ladies who will come to her house for dinner. She mocks and even slaps Godfrey, the house slave in charge of the household, so Godfrey tells July to lay a plain bed sheet in place of the tablecloth as payback because Miss Caroline had accused him of thieving her brother's money. July gladly complies with Godfrey's request and even gives him a cheeky smile (Levy, 2010, p.82). This aspect shows us that July also knows how to mingle and mix with her fellow slaves and knows the difference between right and wrong. She knows that her relationship with Caroline has to be maintained but her relationship with the other slaves is also equally as important, albeit in a different way.

Some would perhaps call this aspect of July a cunning one, but this is not accurate as she is not malicious in her intent and she is just trying to survive in a world full of injustice. So far, we have only looked at her relationship with her mistress and the other house slaves. However, there are also other Mulattos with whom I feel I must analyse her interactions with. A Mulatto is a person of mixed blood. July herself is actually a Mulatto, because her father was white and her mother, black. There is this other Mulatto woman, named Clara, with whom July is at first enamored by, because Clara's skin colour was very light. Clara was also a house slave, but she was very proud of her light skin colour and never failed to show her disdain at July. July's enchantment with Clara does not last long and before long, they are on the outs (p.92).

This shows that skin colour certainly still matters in Jamaica, where even those who are technically still slaves, but are 'whiter' than the others, discriminate against the others who are darker than them. July does not let this get to her but she does keep it at the back of her mind that Clara looks down on her, although she

is also a Mulatto. Although I would like to stress that this fascination with a lighter skin colour is not unique to July and Clara, rather it is rife in many places, particularly Africa. They highlight and look up to European aesthetic ideals, and seem to look down on the African features, which are in contrast with the former (Lake, 2003, p.83).

On the other hand, Miss Clara has moved on to being the wife of a white man and even explains that the only way to level up in society is to marry a white man and increase the 'whiteness' of their offspring (p.240). The process to becoming white is also described in detail. Incredibly, as ridiculous as this can sound to the reader, at that time, it was a reality that many people in Jamaica lived with.

The next big thing that happens in the novel is the Baptist War, in which many of the slaves demand more freedom and wages. It is at this point that many of the plantation owners start to lose money, because the process of emancipation of the slaves was hastened and as a result the plantation owners were unsure of how to handle the slaves that they had. In *The Long Song*, it is during the Baptist War that it is displayed how Miss Caroline had to give in to the house slaves and listen to them, at least until the return of her brother. She was left alone with the house slaves and felt uncomfortable so she opted to go into a safehouse in town until she could come home. Godfrey forces her to call July by her real name and gives her a dog's blanket to cover herself with on the horse carriage. Caroline complies and this is the example of the beginning of the emancipation of the slaves (p.97).

Interestingly, the theory on ambivalence can also be applicable to Miss Caroline, as her personality and character has also changed in this time of survival, where she displays her fear of the exotic (in this case, the coloureds) through her compliance of what they want. As Bhabha has explained it, the power relationship between the colonized and the colonizer is a complex one and as such, cannot be clearly defined in black and white. In this instance, power has shifted from the colonizer to the colonized and we can see the behavioural changes. This is perhaps one instance where power reversal was forced upon the colonizer.

All in all, so far, we have seen how July's experiences have pushed her into developing multiple facets of her personality. From her childhood to her young adulthood, she has learnt a great many things which have forced her to have an emotional maturity far beyond what is expected of her at that age.

Next, the reader bears witness to some flirtation between July and Nimrod, who is a free black man. With the house empty, they end up in July's Master's bed and only wake up to a horrifying realization that the white owners are back and hide under the bed. Whilst they are in hiding, they see John Howarth, July's Master; shoot himself in the head due to financial troubles and the difficult times that lay ahead for white plantation owners. Before long, they are pulled out of their hiding place and although Caroline knows her brother has killed himself, she and Tam Dewar opt to put the blame on Nimrod and kill him so it can look like John Howarth was murdered. This is another instance of the hardship and injustice that July faced. This seemed to have hardened her resolve that she needed to survive in this harsh world. If Nimrod, a supposed free man, can be dealt with injustice in such a way, who is to say what will happen to her, who was still a house slave.

In the final part of *The Long Song*, slavery has now been abolished, but July is still working for Miss Caroline, who is now in charge of the plantation and the house after the death of her brother. We witness how she has pushed July to learn to read and write in English. With this, July is now literate and she could not be prouder of that fact.

## 2.2 MISS CAROLINE AND ROBERT GOODWIN

My next analysis will be on the relationship between Robert Goodwin, July and Caroline. Robert was the new overseer at Caroline's farm and in the beginning he impresses everyone with his progressive views on the abolishment of slavery (Levy, 2010, p.216). When Robert lays his eyes on July, he seems to be smitten and supposedly falls in love with her. July's 'exotic-ness' captivates him and he develops a relationship with her, and even marries her so he can have sexual relations with her. This fascination with the exotic is certainly nothing new and has been explored many a time by postcolonial theorists and researchers alike. According to Missouri, who in her book explores the black female form and the western fascination with it, "black has come to signify latent urges and human desire, making the sexually deviant, unclean, and intellectually backward black woman into the ultimate antithesis of white feminine beauty" (2015, p.62).

To a certain extent this can explain why Robert Goodwin was attracted to July and not Caroline, although he does marry Caroline so he can stay close to July and also for the plantation. Another example of the fascination with the black female form in this book would be when Tam Dewar, the overseer, is shown to rape Kitty, July's mother. One might not understand why these white men would want to rape black women, particularly because many of them are more disgusted with their blackness, but at the same time, resort to

raping or having sexual relations with them. This ambiguity in their internal beings and physical actions can be explained by the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. There are a great many grey areas which allow for such ambivalence and hybridity. Whilst in the case of Kitty, who was brutally raped, it can be said that the colonizer clearly wanted to exert his power over the colonized, it is people like Robert Goodwin who seemingly have good intentions, but in the end resort to the traditional power structure to save their own skin.

Nevertheless, July seems to adapt very well to being Robert Goodwin's secret wife. She develops a facet of her personality that is a little vulnerable. She allows herself to fall in love with Robert, and at the same time serve Caroline, his lawful wife. However, it must be noted that, as previously explained, the rivalry between Miss Clara and July could also have influenced July's decision to get into a relationship with Robert Goodwin. This can be seen in the beginning of their relationship where July is very pleased that Robert does not even look at Miss Clara but would rather keep his eyes on July and help her (p.248).

July first impresses Robert with her little knowledge about the Bible, as she comes to realise that Robert is a religious person and is impressed by such things. This can be said to be cunning on the part of July as it is obvious she has not really looked into what the Bible has to say in its entirety, but she makes him believe that she is a devout God-fearing black woman. Perhaps this can be construed as July creating an aspect of her identity as a Mulatto, which she doesn't fail to mention to Robert. He is quite intrigued by this and looks to talk to her more about her background and religious beliefs.

July is also intrigued by Robert Goodwin as he has not behaved like a typical white man (p.265). There is a shift in the power play between the colonized and the colonizer. Bhabha's theory of hybridity, ambivalence and mimicry can also be applied here. The fact that July has resorted to being all the things a white man might like, apart from her physical looks, to enchant Robert shows that she has to a certain extent also absorbed some of the qualities of the white person and understands their culture. In this sense a third space has been created as she is no longer fully black or fully white. She is in between, just like her biological make up. Robert, on the other hand, also displays some ambivalence as he has started to understand and absorb the culture of the black person, beginning with an acceptance and respect of the black being, which is definitely not an oft demonstrated quality.

July is understandably upset when Robert Goodwin marries Caroline, but again accepts it when he explains why he married her. He claims that he can help July more and be close to her. However, the reader gets the feeling that Robert Goodwin has done this to elevate his social standing. He will no longer be just the overseer, but he will now be the Master of Amity, the plantation that July lived upon. Here traces of the old colonial white man seems to slowly crop and from here on Levy shows us how Goodwin reaps benefits from both Caroline and July. Although Caroline is fully aware that her husband is in love with July, she opts to ignore it and carry on with life. If one were to analyze the dynamics of the relationship between the three of them, one can see how complicated it is and the only 'winner' here, would be Robert Goodwin, who will have the pleasure of wealth and power from Caroline and sexual and emotional gratification from July. Robert Goodwin has now resorted to what other white men have been doing in the Caribbean for years and years before him.

Trouble crops at the Amity when their Master, Robert Goodwin starts changing his kind behaviour and makes demands of them, as though they were still slaves. He calls them ungrateful and says that because he had been kind to them, they should reciprocate and do what he asks. The apprentices are clever enough to retaliate and tell him that they will only do what the law dictates of them. This is because they have heard of many a time where the plantation workers were cheated of their hard-earned money by being made to work longer hours and days and only paid for a day's work. Robert is also abusing his power and going back to the old ways of the white man. It is infuriating because the reader had expected Robert Goodwin to be better than that.

July is rudely awakened to the fact that Robert is no longer the perfect white man who shows respect to her people and treats everyone with respect. She bears witness to how Robert has forced the plantation workers back to work, which is why burning their living quarters if they do not pay him rent and refusing to work for him. She is also sickened by how he starts to treat her, which is with the tone of a white Master speaking to a slave (Levy, 2010, p.326). From here on out Robert treats July just as he would any other house slave. His disenchantment resonates with what many other women like July would have experienced before her, under colonial rule, which is as something that can be discarded of, as easily as it was gotten in the beginning. Sadly, the plays back to the typical relationship between the colonized and the colonizer.

The power relations that have existed for a long time has now become a reality in July's life, as Robert leaves for England and does not bother with her, which is ironic, seeing as his early fascination for her was

so intense. It is cruel how July's baby, Emily, who was hers and Robert's offspring, was taken from her. She was fooled into handing over the baby to Miss Molly, another housemaid, for a while and before she realised it, Caroline and Molly had also left for England with Robert and Emily in tow. July never sees her daughter again and although attempts were made to locate Emily, it proves fruitless.

Conceivably, the story of July is a very interesting as it proves how one woman can weave her way through a life filled with more downs than ups and still retain multiple facets of personality and behaviour.

### 3. CONCLUSION

As has been explained earlier, Bhabha's theory on ambivalence, mimicry and hybridity can be applied to understand the relationships that exist between July, Caroline and also Robert, amongst others. Firstly, July, who has witnessed a lot of the atrocities and injustices to her people since young, learns to weave her way to the good graces of the white people and at the same time also the other slaves, with whom she knows she has to deal with. Bhabha (1993) explains this very well when he says that this brings about two very important elements of colonial discourse, one of development and mastery, and another which is fictional and illusory. This brings to mean that July could have at first used this ambivalence to develop herself a surviving mechanism, which was combination of both cultures that she had to live with.

Secondly, there was another facet of her behavior, which was fictional and illusory, which we can say was her relationship with Robert Goodwin. She allowed herself to be buoyed by the illusion, which was Robert Goodwin's charm and attention. Her character, again, developed as a post-colonial subject who was in love with the idea that a white man could be different from the rest. This she truly believed until her illusion was shattered by how Robert treated her at the end. July has again created an identity out of that illusion. We saw how she 'crafted' herself into a half white, half black person who could seduce Robert.

Cross cultural relations are definitely very complex and we can see this in *The Long Song*. This is why perhaps this book is a very good example of how multiple identities can be developed by a postcolonial subject and at the end of the day, no one culture remains 'pure'. We are always creating new identities as the world becomes more and more globalized. The notion that a culture has to remain unadulterated is a concept that is backward and irrelevant. We are constantly creating new identities to help us cope with the different experiences that we have and once we are exposed to it, our way of thinking can never go back to the original. July undoubtedly has also created within herself a hybrid of not only the colonizer and the colonized, but also an amalgam of the pre and post slavery condition.

All in all, it is safe to say that Andrea Levy has put into print a very authentic experience of the postcolonial subject. July's thoughts, feelings and behaviour very much reflects how she has coped with all the difficulties that she has faced. Bhabha's theory of the postcolonial discourse too, can be applied to July, as has been explained earlier. To conclude, one can articulate that, given the history of Jamaica, the traits that many postcolonial subjects display go hand in hand with Bhabha's theories on ambivalence and hybridity. The discourse on postcolonial subjects, even more modern ones, has shown a tendency to correlate with the experiences of their predecessors.

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