

A STUDY OF 'RACE' IN ANDREA LEVY'S NOVEL *EVERY LIGHT IN THE HOUSE BURNIN'*

Mr. Parmeshwar Bira Thorbole
Research Scholar
thorbobepamu22@gmail.com

&

Dr. Prabhanjan Mane
Associate professor
Department of English
Shivaji University, Kolhapur
prabhanjanmane@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper strives to discuss race as sensitive issue reflected in Andrea Levy's novel Every Light in the House Burnin' (1994). Born to black Jamaican parents in Britain, Levy tries to explore the racial experiences of black Jamaican immigrants during the postcolonial period in Britain. She exclusively attempts to reveal the discrimination and humiliation of black people on the basis of 'race' in the contemporary British society. This paper also interprets the contemporary meaning of 'race' and its connotation with the national identity of black people in the context of British circumstances throughout Levy's novel.

Keywords: 'race,' racial consciousness, racism, racial prejudice, racial discrimination, xenophobia, race and national identity, black British, Jamaican, immigrant, etc.

This research paper strives to explore race and its aspects in Andrea Levy's novel *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994). Levy is one of the contemporary black British women novelists. She began her literary career with the publication of the novel entitled as *Every Light in the House Burnin'* in 1994. It is an autobiographical novel which narrates the story of a black girl named Angela Jacob, who was born and brought up in North London, and her father named Winston Jacob, who was immigrated from Jamaica to England with the Ship of Empire Windrush in 1948 that can be considered as a major event in the history of England.

He was born and brought up in Jamaica. Then, Angela's 'Mum', Beryl Jacob, followed Winston Jacob after six months, and they were living together in Earl's Court in London. The novel mainly focuses on Angela Jacob's suffering and her family's traumatic experiences of racism after the 1950s in England. The plot of the novel largely moves around the character named Winston Jacob, an ageing traditional black man, who lives in racist circumstances in postcolonial period. He begins his journey of life with economic trouble, middle with illness and finally ends with his painful death in England. Moreover, this novel chiefly explores as Charlotte Beyer points out:

...the impact of illness, isolation, loss of dignity and social status, and the treatment of elderly black British individuals by health system and local communities.¹

That is to say, Levy vividly explores Winston Jacob's illness and trauma of his old age in contemporary British society. He does not get proper treatment in health care center, while he experiences discrimination because of his 'race.' Thus, the novel reveals the racial prejudice in the minds of white people in Britain.

Angela Jacob draws attention to the story of her parent's experiences as being blacks and immigrant people from Jamaica to Britain. At the same time, she represents herself as the British born black daughter of Caribbean immigrant parents. The novel explores Angela's struggle for self-identity. Jo Pready also noted:

Levy turns to the Bildungsroman and renegotiates a traditional coming of age novel, with its psychological and moral shaping of the individual, alongside a kind of spatial initiation, which entails explorations of relations of relations among inside/outside spaces, relations to family, and (re)construction of self.²

It seems that throughout the novel, Angela encounters various events and incidents as a British born black girl. She also reveals her family's negotiation and racial relationship with contemporary British society. She explores their black British identity. It seems that Angela is the best example of a black British female representation in contemporary British society. She gets double marginalization – being a 'black' and 'woman'. Therefore, throughout this novel, Levy raises the questions of 'race' and 'gender' in Britain.

Racial consciousness is a collective behavior of groups of people. The novel, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* explores how characters like Angela Jacob, Winston Jacob, and Beryl Jacob and others are very conscious about their 'race' as well as national belonging. Angela Jacob explores her parents' black identity, rootlessness, and their immigrant status in contemporary British society. She exposes her racial feelings about her father. She reveals that her father never speaks about their family background and life in Jamaica. Moreover, he does not like to open and share his name. That is, he was frustrated with his identity because of his immigrant status and race. It seems that he was under the pressure of his

belongingness. He became a victim of racial discrimination in the contemporary society. This is reflected in Angela Jacob's observation about her father when she says: "My dad didn't like anyone to know his name. It was another secret."³ It appears that the character Winston Jacob is very conscious regarding his belongingness. Furthermore, Angela Jacob explores his black identity and trauma of his old age. She describes some racial features of her father as follows:

Or perhaps I should describe the old, wild-haired man - fat and bloated by steroids aimed at keeping his dying body alive a little longer. My dad was all these men and many more. (4)

She explores some parameters of race differences. She distinguishes her father on the basis of some physical features. Her father is an ageing black and ill man. She draws attention to her father's misery and plight because of illness. It seems that he became a victim of 'race.'

The novel deals with the theme of racism that explores misery, injustice, and the plight of black immigrant people in postwar British society. This novel explores the trauma of Winston Jacob, elderly black immigrant, who was settled in Britain. It predominantly focuses on the troublesome life of Winston Jacob in contemporary society. Angela Jacob expresses her feelings regarding the misery of her old father. She says: "I could tell that my dad was worried by what was happening to his body." (35) It seems that the novel highlights the traumatic experiences of ageing dad and his deep anxiety concerning the decaying body. That is, he could not live a carefree life in Britain. Moreover, Angela Jacob goes to take information of services and treatment at Health Council, where she realizes that her father does not receive proper treatment and service. She explores injustice. She says:

I went to the library and the community Health Council and armed myself with as much information as I could about the service available to my dad. There was not very much. But it was clear that the gateway to all services was through a willing GP. (88)

Furthermore, she exposes her father's plight and emotions relating to the last moment of life. She also emphasizes his boring way of thinking, illness, and poor treatment. She draws attention to his painful life as an ageing black man. The narration shows as: "When is it going to end, Anne? It's just one thing after another. When's it going to end?" (113) She reveals her old father's painful life during postcolonial era. He suffers not only physically but also mentally as well as emotionally. Further, Winston Jacob often considers the painkillers are not helping him. Hence, it can be said that he experiences the traumatic life as an old black man in contemporary society. Thus, Levy creates the tragedy of an ageing black man in Britain. Levy Writes:

There was pain there – not physical, not for me, but pain that you can't see coming, that smacks you inside and pulls and ripe at you. No aspirin or plaster can help (239).

The novel explores the racial prejudice in the minds of white people. As a result, Winston Jacob gets humiliation. He does not get dignity. The novel focuses on the question of the dignity of Winston Jacob as an ageing black man. Angela Jacob explores her sincere thoughts regarding her father's dignity. She says:

Why couldn't he die gracefully, with dignity? Fading silently from life with a gentle smile and a touching last request. So his family could stand round his death bed and weep and mourn their loss. No, he had to die kicking and screaming, in his life. The biggest protest. The first rail against injustice (243).

It is observed that he tolerates very painful life as a black man in Britain. At the final stage of his life, he becomes helpless and vulnerable. The narration explores that he silently bears the tragic life and it ends with full of pains because of his immigrant status and skin colour as black. The novel concludes with the thought of Winston Jacob's humiliation and plight as an ageing black man in Britain. Levy exposes the trauma of an ageing black man. Finally, the novel opens Angela Jacob's expression regarding her father's dead body. She narrates that "His eyes were closed, but his mouth slightly open." (247) It seems that it is a symbol of protest against racist society.

The paper further discusses the consciousness of 'race' in this novel. The idea of race explains that the particular group of race shares common things such as- blood, history, traditions, etc. In this regard, Angela Jacob and her mum were going to church on Sunday, while she explores her racial consciousness in the novel. She says to mum that "we're just the same, Mum." (9) She explores her feelings of racial roots and consciousness. Similarly, Angela Jacob explains her brother John's physical features that explain his black identity. She explains:

My brother was born with red hair- a red, fuzzy head of hair that people would stare at in the street. 'It's the Scottish in you,'... (15)

She reveals his racial roots and inheritance. She states that people stare at him in the street and hate him because of his roots and inheritance of the black race. Moreover, she exposes mother's feelings of racial consciousness. It seems that characters awareness regarding their race and national belonging. Similarly, Angela Jacob's Aunt explores her feelings of racial consciousness regarding John Jacob, while she says: "You must be Johnny – you're a big boy – look at you – red hair. Look Andrew, red hair, must be the Scottish in you." (120) Moreover, Angela Jacob explores the black identity of her sister, Patricia. Her black consciousness regarding Patricia is evident. She narrates:

Her skin was much darker than anyone's in our family but her features were fine and more European. Sometimes she looked like she didn't belong to us. (21)

Like Angela, Aunt also reveals the same feelings regarding Patricia. She says:

‘Oh, you dark – not like your sister.’.... ‘You must be like your mummy’s side of the family.’ (120)

The above narration shows the black consciousness in the mind of Aunt. Thus, it is observed that characters are very conscious regarding their family, people, and national belonging in the context of race, and racial roots.

In addition, the consciousness of race explores the sense of difference as well. Racial consciousness is a purification of the individual’s experience that is different in particular time and space. Firstly, the person understands his racial group which is assigned by others and its effect on himself. Secondly, it is the person’s attitude of making difference to others on the basis of racial categories. Angela Jacob considers that white people make blacks different on the basis of ‘skin colour.’ Her individual interpretation explores its effect on her mind and life. She always feels that she is different than whites because of her skin colour is ‘black.’ Therefore, she exposes her racial feelings as ‘black or coloured.’ She says to mum, “But we’re different – we’re coloured.” (59)

It seems that she reveals her feelings of ‘otherness.’ She expresses her feelings of colour consciousness. She explores the sense of belonging. The quote also shows they belong to the same features such as family, people, class, race, and nation as well.

Paul Gilroy explores the contemporary meaning of ‘the new race and racism’ in the milieu of the contemporary period. He posits the newness of new race and racism and its link with various discourses. According to him:

its novelty lies in the capacity to link discourses of patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia, Englishness, Britishness, militarism and gender difference into a complex system which gives ‘race’ its contemporary meaning.⁴

Gilroy suggests the contemporary meaning of race through multifaceted classification that explores his perception of race in the contemporary period. It seems that the contemporary meaning of race is changed that explores the new racism is closely linked with the discourse of ‘xenophobia.’ Further, she says ‘we’re coloured’, this quote shows the feelings of xenophobia in the minds of Angela Jacob. Therefore, she experiences feelings of ‘xenophobia’ as a black daughter in Britain. Thus, Levy discusses the question of racism was a debatable issue during postcolonial era. Moreover, W. E. Du Bois says that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”⁵ It is true regarding this novel. Therefore, it seems that the problem of colour line is reflected in this novel. It also reveals the negative connotation in the mind of Angela Jacob.

The race is a socially constructed phenomenon. Social orders create social structures that practice on the ground of ‘race.’ Angela Jacob often reveals feelings of black consciousness in her school. While talking about her classmate, Ada, she says:

Ada was black. She was also in my class at school. Me and Ada were the only black pupils in our class. And Ada’s family were the only other black family that came to our church. Ada’s family came from Africa. (141)

It seems that school is a racially structured form of society, where Angela Jacob exposes the black identity of Ada and her as “the only black pupils.” In other words, the school is a microcosm of the contemporary social structure. She also exposes that Ada’s family belongs to Africa. Thus, it seems that the consciousness of race is closely related to nationality as well.

Besides, this novel underlines the issue of humiliation of black people during postcolonial era. Levy highlights Ada’s humiliation in the class. She receives inhuman treatment in the class. Michael, another white classmate, tortures and teases Ada as “stupid,” “dirty,” and “darkie” girl in the class. He racially discriminates her as black or coloured. Levy writes:

“She’s stupid and dirty,” Michael said, folding his arms defiantly.

‘Michael...

“She’s dirty, Miss, all darkies are dirty. She’s dirty.” (144)

The above narration highlights racial prejudice in the mind of white student named Michael and his attitude, and racial awareness towards black girl in the class. Moreover, the above quote also reveals that Angela Jacob and Ada get heartless treatment in the class. They experience insults, exploitations, and abuses from a student like Michael. They get irritating treatment. That is, he repeatedly uses the words like “stupid,” “darkie,” and “dirty.” He expresses his hatred for black students in the school. Further, he comments Angela also. He says that “She’s not even proper coloured.” (144) It seems that Michael reveals his feelings of colour consciousness. The above narration signifies racial conflict among black and white people in contemporary British society. Therefore, black people become a victim of colour politics of race. It is a kind of institutional racism that explores racially structures of society. Racial conflict is a major factor in the development of racial consciousness in England. Thus, Levy tries to explore the racial conflict between black and white people throughout this novel. Thus, it seems that Angela Jacob and Ada get traumatic experiences, verbal abuses, and inhuman treatment in the class.

Racial consciousness explores the actual experiences of black people in England. The novel deals with the theme of racial discrimination in England. Black people get discrimination on various grounds such as race, class, gender, and nationality. However, the race is one of the major factors of discrimination. White people discriminate black people on racial grounds in England. The character like Winston Jacob, Beryl Jacob, Angela Jacob, and John Jacob experience racial discrimination on various public places such as schools, playgrounds, churches, hospitals, and job places. For example, Angela Jacob elucidates Mum’s racial segregation in Jamaica. She points out the feelings of the Jamaican people regarding her mother. She exposes that Jamaicans were also prejudiced about mother’s fairness because of that sometimes she gets privilege as well as racial discrimination.

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. (7)

The novel also deals with the aspect of racism. Racism is an ideology that explores the attitude of one group of people towards another. Racist approach deals with aspects such as misery, discrimination, violence, and crime. It seems that racism is a social antihuman practice against black people in the world. Of course, black people get inhuman treatment. Angela and her brother were playing with their friends nearby their house, where they get racial discrimination. They realise the traumatic experience of racial discrimination on the playground. The narration of the novel shows in the realistic mode as follows:

'Hit him, Ronnie!' Brucie said, still rubbing his ear. 'Hit him - he's just a golliwog.'

Ronnie looked round at Brucie and laughed, 'Yeah, come on you golliwog - you nig-nog - hit me with your bat.'

My brother lowered the bat and stared crying louder. 'Your little sister golliwog's crying, fuzzy. Better take her back to where you came from.'
(57)

The above episode highlights an attitude of bitterness and hatred among white children towards in England. It seems that their friends racially discriminate Angela Jacob and her brother, John. Moreover, the above episode shows the racial prejudice, racial awareness, and racial hatred of black people. Even white children raise the question of national identity as well. They repeatedly used the sentence as: 'where you come from?' The sentence reveals that consciousness of 'race' is closely related to the question of national identity. Therefore, race intersects with the idea of nationalism. White children, again and again, used the words such as: "nig-nog, golliwog, jungle, coons, and blackie." These words signify the negative identity of black people in their mind. Such repetition of words shows racial prejudice among white children is evident in the novel. It seems that Angela Jacob, and her brother named John receive inhuman and irritating treatment, traumatic experience, and verbal abuses on the playground. Thus, Levy shows racial attitude and prejudice among white children concerning black children of immigrant parents in contemporary society.

Levy broadly explores the theme of racial prejudice in this novel. Angela Jacob and her brother, John realize the traumatic experiences of racial discrimination and violence on the playground. The sentences- 'Yeah, take her back to the jungle. You come from the jungle - all wogs come from the jungle' (57) shows the sentiments of prejudice among white children in English society. They consider that black people as savages from the jungles of Africa. It seems that consciousness of race raises the question of race and national belonging. Besides, the racial prejudice of the inferior group is more unpleasant, hostile, and powerful than the dominant group because they aware of their inferior status of race than the whites. They

know their past humiliation and oppression. In this regard, John reacts against racial prejudice, while he says:

‘Take her back to the jungle,’ Kathleen said as she put her hand over mouth and laughed.

‘Yeah, take her back to the jungle. You come from jungle – all wogs come from the jungle.’

‘Shut up,’ my brother screamed. ‘We don’t.’ (57)

It seems that John tries to protest against the dominant group. That is why John tries to oppose them. Here, it is observed that white children’s deep racial prejudice and consciousness is evident. It is studied that Levy creates the scene of racial discrimination in contemporary British society. Thus, she confronts the humiliation of black people in the contemporary period in Britain.

This novel mainly deals with the theme of racism and racial prejudice. Racism means one’s bitter attitude towards another people. It is a social approach that explores the view of white people against black people. It can be seen by their friends, again and again, call them ‘coons.’ It literally means black people. Angela Jacob explores racial attitude of white children towards black children. She narrates:

‘They call us names,’ I said.

‘They call you names? My mum said, looking at my brother. ‘What names they call you?’

‘They said we were golliwogs and nig-nogs.’

.....

‘They said we are coons,’ I began to cry again.

.....

... ‘You’ve caught the lurgy from the wogs’ house – injected!’ (59)

Angela Jacob explores their friends’ negative mindset. She shows their intention and feelings of hate against black children of immigrant parents. Thus, it is found out that Levy explores the colour politics of race in contemporary society throughout her novel. It is observed the racial practice against black people in contemporary society.

A critic like Paul Gilroy says that the contemporary meaning of race is interlinked with Englishness or Britishness. The novel explores the theme of race and national identity. Racial status grows to be a valuable object in the postwar British society. Black people face the question of their racial identity on every path of life in England. The novel explores old Winston Jacob’s boring and painful experiences after his retirement in Britain. It also reveals his feelings of misplaced identity that shows his interest neither in England nor in Jamaica. Therefore, it explains the reasons for his nervousness. He follows English ways of life and culture, government, eats English food; yet, he is not British or English. That is, he explores his dilemma of national identity as British or Jamaican is evident. He says that “I don’t know – this and that” (35) Therefore, it seems that he is totally confused regarding his national

identity. It seems that the question of nationality remains a significant issue in contemporary British society. Thus, Levy describes the problem of an identity crisis in contemporary society.

It is often true that the novel explores Angela and her family's questions of race and national identity in Britain in the contemporary period. All the time, white people reject and hate black people because of their race and immigrant status. Moreover, they always consider that black people belong to Africa. So, they treat black people as an immigrant, not British. The novel explores black immigrant's experiences in the postcolonial period in England. The consciousness of 'race' explores that the popular assumption in the minds of white people regarding black people in British society. They claim that blacks are immigrants, they are not British. The narration can elucidate this issue:

'You aren't English – my dad said,' Steven joined in. 'He said you come over with all the other coons. You wanna go back, coming over here. You wanna go back – go back to where you came from – blackie.'(57)

The above narration explores feelings of racial consciousness of Steven, a friend of Angela Jacob and John. Steven exposes his feelings regarding black people's immigrant status. He considers that all black people are immigrant. He makes a statement on the nationality of Angela Jacob and her brother, John. Thus, it appears that Levy confronts the question of race and national identity in Britain.

The novel explores Angela Jacob's mother's deep frustration regarding national belonging. That is, British people reject her nationality as British. Angela says:

After thirty-eight years of living in Britain, teaching British children, paying British taxes, learning British ways, she wasn't British. (8)

The above narration underlines the dilemma of Angela Jacob's mother's national identity in contemporary society. She has been living for almost thirty-eight years in Britain, she taught British children, she followed the English government, she learned all English ways of life; yet, she is not a British citizen. That is, in the context of nationality, white people never approve that she is British. They consider that she is a black immigrant from the colonized country. Throughout her insightful feelings, it is observed that she experiences the consciousness of 'race' is closely related to the question of national identity in England. Levy exposes her plight and rejection of nationality on the basis of 'race.' Thus, it seems that black immigrants realize and experience the dilemma of national identity in the contemporary period.

White people usually raise the common question about black people's nationality that explores racial prejudice among the white people in Britain. In this regard, white people raise the question of her parent's national as well as racial belongingness. It seems that they raise the question of their national identity as well as racial roots. In this regard, Angela Jacob explains her parent's experiences of racial as well as national identity. The following event can elucidate this:

‘Where are you from, Angela?’

‘I was born in this country,’ I said, as I always said to this familiar question.

‘Yes, but what about your parents – are they Jewish?’

‘No, they come from Jamaica.’

‘Both of them?’

‘Yes.’ (186-187)

Therefore, it is observed that Levy tackles the questions of racial and national identity throughout her novel. Thus, it seems that the questions of race and national identity remained as critical matters in the study of postwar immigrants in Britain.

In a way, it is studied that Levy explores the questions of ‘race’ throughout her novel *Every Light in the House Burnin’*. She exposes racial discrimination, and suffering of black characters like Angela Jacob, John Jacob, and their parents during postcolonial period in England. She also shows the racial prejudice in the mind of white people that proves negative attitude towards black immigrants and their children. It appears that Angela Jacob and other black characters experience the dilemma of national identity. Thus, it seems that race and racism is an antihuman practice against black people during postcolonial England.

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