

# التقليد الثقافي في رواية أندريا ليفي "جزيرة صغيرة"

## Cultural Mimicry in Andrea Levy's Small Island

أ.د. حسن محمد صالح

Prof. Dr. Hasan Mohammed Saleh

جامعة الموصل/كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية/قسم اللغة الإنكليزية

University of Mosul/ College of Education for Humanities  
/Department of English

E-mail: <mailto:hmsaleh74@mosul.edu.iq>

ORCID: 0000-0002-7575-5235

م.م. هرزين فاضل عبد الله

جامعة زاخو/كلية العلوم الإنسانية/قسم اللغة الإنكليزية

University of Zakho/ College of Humanities/ Department of  
English

E-mail: <mailto:herjin.abdullah@uoz.edu.krd>

ORCID: 0000-0002-4178-5946

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## الملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى استكشاف كيف يوصف التقليد الثقافي بشكل حيوي في رواية أندريا ليفي "جزيرة صغيرة" (٢٠٠٤). وتعد ليفي واحدة من أبرز الروائيين الجامايكيين الذين تناولوا البحث عن الهوية الحقيقية. حيث تنسج الكاتبة البريطانية-الجامايكية أندريا ليفي بحرفية عالية حيوات شخصياتها الرئيسية على خلفية بريطانية وجامايكية ما بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية، متناولاً موضوعات الهجرة والعنصرية والهوية الثقافية. إن رواية أندريا ليفي هي عمل ما بعد استعماري يصور ويستكشف الهوية، والهجنة الثقافية، وكذلك الهجرة في سياق الاستعمار البريطاني وجيل ويندراش. وتحليل التقليد الثقافي من منظور ما بعد الاستعمارية، يعتمد البحث على مفاهيم هومي ك. بابا حول التقليد والثقافة والهوية، والتي تشكل في الأساس جوهر رواية "جزيرة صغيرة". وأخيراً، تبحث رواية "جزيرة صغيرة" في كيفية ارتباط أفكار العرق والطبقة والهوية ارتباطاً وثيقاً. فمن خلال الحيوانات المتشابهة لكويني وهورتينز وجيلبرت وبيرنارد، تعكس الرواية تعقيدات الانتماء والأثر الدائم لإرث الاستعمار. توضح رحلات الشخصيات صراعات وانتصارات التعامل مع عالم يتسم بالأمل والتحيز على حد سواء، مما يجعل منها تعليقاً قوياً على تجربة المهاجر والبحث عن الهوية في مجتمع يتغير بسرعة.

## Abstract

This paper aims to explore how cultural mimicry is vividly articulated in Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004). Levy is one of the most prominent Jamaican novelists who tackled the search for the true identity. The British-Jamaican writer Andrea Levy intricately weaves together the lives of its main characters against the background of post-WWII Britain and Jamaica, exploring themes of immigration, racism, and cultural identity. Andrea Levy's novel is a postcolonial novel that depicts and explores identity, cultural hybridity, as well as migration in the context of British colonialism and the Windrush generation. To analyze cultural mimicry from the lens of postcolonialism, the research adopts Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry, culture, and identity which fundamentally constitute the core of *Small Island*.

Ultimately, *Small Island* examines how the concepts of race, class, and identity are closely interrelated. Through the intertwined lives of Queenie, Hortense, Gilbert, and Bernard, the novel reflects on the complexities of belonging and the enduring impact of colonial legacies. The characters' journeys illustrate the struggles and triumphs of navigating a world marked by both hope and prejudice, making it a powerful commentary on the immigrant experience and the search for identity in a rapidly changing society.



## Introduction

Andrea Levy was a British- born writer, the daughter of Jamaican immigrants who sailed to England with the Empire Windrush ship in search of a better life. Her father was one of the first people to embark on that journey, reaching England, or the ‘Mother Country,’ in 1948. In 1956 they welcomed a daughter. Levy was raised as a black child in a white society. She gained a unique view on her native country as a result of this experience, feeling neither completely integrated into the community nor entirely alienated. It was not until she was in her mid-thirties that Andrea Levy started writing. In a 2015 interview, Levy said” For me, writing has always been a journey of discovery about my past and my family” (as cited in Roynon, 2017). Levy aimed to set herself apart from her peers and chose to enroll in creative writing classes, where she was encouraged to write about familiar topics. She compelled herself to craft a story centered on her family, Jamaican heritage, the migration wave, and the tales shared by her relatives. These were merely bits and pieces of old stories, so she looked through some historical records from that period; however, she ultimately did not find a satisfying outcome (Çal, 2023):

It is hard for anyone to research their genealogy, but it is even harder (though not impossible) for someone with my background. Most of the records are incomplete or unavailable at best; destroyed or non-existent at worst. I discovered it would take a great deal of time, patience and expensive travelling for me to put together my definitive family tree. So, I did the next best thing. I talked to my mum (Levy, 2000).

The experiences of Black British people in Britain were not well-documented at the time. Levy started writing the books she had always wanted to read as a young woman after attending in writing seminars. She examined the issues encountered by black British-born children of Jamaican migrants from various angles in her first three works (Procter, 2008). She, herself, felt not to belong and encountered a sense of inferiority and conflicted with her Englishness and her identity as a black. Even though she was an English citizen, she was always overwhelmed by a sense of shame because, like all Caribbean people, she was a legal alien. Levy, however, has always taken great pride in her Jamaican culture and feels that national identity is more about political identity than personal identity. It is voluntary, and Englishness must always be kept entirely distinct from ethnicity. She consistently studies on Jamaican customs and culture, Caribbean history, and the status of immigrants in British society (Çal, 2023).

Roynon (2017) argues that Andrea Levy's writing is characterised by its exploration of her past and family, focusing on what it means to be Black and British. Her works aim to make the invisible visible and

reintegrate marginalised people into history. Her semi-autobiographical debut novel, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994), tells a story of a Jamaican family living in London during the 1960s. Her second novel, *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996), is set in the 1970s and centers on two very different sisters who live on a public estate in London. After having a mental breakdown, Faith Jackson, a young Black woman, travels to Jamaica in *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), where she learns about her unknown past (Procter, 2008). In her first three novels, her last two are more complex and ambitious, set in historical contexts of 1940s Jamaica and Britain (*Small Island*) and nineteenth-century Jamaica (*The Long Song*). Despite their smaller scopes, her earlier novels also highlight the interrelation of Jamaica and Britain.

Levy's novels are known for their deep psychological portrayals, compassion, humor, and anger at social and historical injustices. Her writing often combines various viewpoints, perspectives, and time periods, achieving an epic yet intimate scale. *Small Island* (2004), for example, presents diverse perspectives, addressing issues of racial politics, gender, and social class. The *Long Song* (2010) is noted for its fresh and intense depiction of slavery and its aftermath, particularly through the compelling interior life of its protagonist, July (Roynan, 2017). Following the success of *Small Island*, Levy was celebrated worldwide especially in Jamaica. In an interview with BBC World Book Club in 2019, she said that visiting her parents' home country just a few times, she felt welcomed, but did not see herself as a Caribbean writer to which she had been referred to by the Jamaican press. Levy, often regarded as a Caribbean writer, had not lived the experience of one being immersed in that culture. She says, "I'm still English, but I also have this wonderfully rich heritage which I would like more people to understand and acknowledge. And that's become very important to me" (Independent, 2004). *Small Island* is one of her novels that addresses the experiences of race, both black and white, class, and identity,

London was home to Andrea Levy. In addition to residing and working in her favorite city, London served as the backdrop for her first four novels. Her second book, *Never Far from Nowhere*, was longlisted for the Orange Prize, and she received an Arts Council Award. In addition to her books, she authored stories that have been anthologised, read on the radio, and printed in newspapers. She served as a judge for the Saga Prize, Orange Futures, and Orange Prize for Fiction (Procter, 2008). As a transnational writer with roots in Jamaica and her upbringings in England, Andrea Levy's novels with, "[the] highly complex social structure, has proved [...] to be a fruitful site for investigating hybridized cultural forms of Britishness" (Toplu, 2005).



Following 15 years of surviving with metastatic breast cancer, she passed away in February 2019 at the age of 62. Her ashes were laid to rest on the eastern side of Highgate Cemetery.

### **A Short History of the Caribbean/ Historical Context**

The Caribbean has endured an ongoing and cruel history of colonisation and exploitation since Christopher Columbus' arrival in 1492. The oppression of native populations, particularly Jamaicans, and the introduction of English culture, which finally took over the region, are the primary characteristics of the colonial era. For generations, Jamaicans and other Caribbean peoples have been forced to choose between accepting English culture as superior and then rejecting it outright. The identities and sense of belonging of Indigenous peoples in British society have been significantly impacted by this predicament (Çal, 2023). The Caribbean and its people were affected considerably by colonialism and the native populations were frequently forced to adopt the languages, religions, and cultural customs that European forces introduced to the region. The extensive exploitation of the region's natural resources brought about by colonisation also had a damaging impact on the local economy and ecosystem. Additionally, lengthy exploitation and mistreatment of the indigenous and enslaved inhabitants were characteristics of colonialism in the Caribbean. Large numbers of Africans were transported to the area as slaves to labor on plantations, where they endured cruel treatment. This system of slavery had a long-lasting effect on the area and its inhabitants and was an essential part of the colonial economy (Çal, 2023).

Originally inhabited by the Arawak and Taino, Jamaica was later occupied by Africans who were brought over as enslaved people by the British. Each of these three groups had unique customs and cultures. But they had no choice but to coexist and work together under the harsh circumstances of slavery. Thus, a new culture that combined the three tribes started to emerge. The language, music, cuisine, and customs of this new culture were its defining characteristics (Kaur 2018, as cited in (Çal, 2023). Language is a key marker of Jamaican identity. While Standard English is the official language. Jamaican Patois (Patwa) is the vernacular spoken by the majority of the population and a core element of national expression. The linguist Hubert Devonish (1986) argues that Patwa is a powerful symbol of Jamaican identity and cultural pride. In his work *Language and Liberation: Creole Language Politics in the Caribbean*, he advocates for the recognition of Patwa as a legitimate language and a tool of national expression, especially in music and storytelling. It is not only artistic but political, expressing resistance, social commentary, and affirmation of black identity.



In 1948, over a thousand Caribbean immigrants from various countries arrived in England aboard the Empire Windrush. After World War II, due to Britain's population decline, there was a severe labour shortage. The government responded by granting citizenship to all of its colonial subjects and inviting them to Britain in exchange for better living and working conditions. Nevertheless, upon their arrival, the hopeful immigrants encountered a largely unwelcoming British population and endured harsh racial discrimination in all parts of life, from housing to employment to church membership and entering pubs. Despite these difficulties, the Afro-Caribbean immigration grew gradually until 1962, when limitations were imposed. In today's multicultural British society, a large number of people are of the Caribbean origin.

### **Caribbean Understanding of Culture, Identity, and Nationhood**

While the Caribbean immigrants were in pursuit of a better life in England, the people left behind rose against the British Empire. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, West Indian activists began to assert their voices, advocating for political reforms and federation as a means to challenge colonial rule. This activism was often intertwined with racial consciousness and the pursuit of self-determination. The 1930s and early 1940s were marked by economic depression and political unrest in the British Caribbean, prompting calls for change. Activists sought to address the systemic inequalities and exploitative conditions faced by the black majority. The labour rebellions in the British Caribbean from 1934 to 1939 were driven by economic hardship and social injustice, leading to significant political changes in the region. These uprisings marked the entry of the working class into reform efforts and heightened demands for self-governance. The rebellions were fueled by poor economic conditions, limited job opportunities, and racial discrimination in colonial governance. The unrest drew attention from black activists outside the Caribbean, who framed the labour struggles as part of a broader anticolonial movement (Duke, 2015).

Duke (2015) stated that as the 1950s began, the British Caribbean territories were on their way to nationhood. The final steps towards achieving this goal and its specific shape remained undetermined. Various groups, including West Indian politicians, the general population, British colonial officials, and interested parties outside the region, disagreed on whether the colonies should pursue nationhood individually or collectively, as well as the level of self-government. In 1959, the Caribbean Act was passed and in which the islands were merged into a new nation, yet, people like H. W. Springer, a Barbadian labor leader said



“We were—indeed we are still—unsure of ourselves, still feeling our way to Nationhood—still trying to discover what we are like—what makes us characteristically West Indian or, if you like, what is the essence of our West Indianness (as cited in Duke, 2015, p.188).” Similar to Springer, Elsa Goveia, a West Indian historian, uttered her concerns on the notion of her peoples’ identity,

Changes in government will be meaningless until we have settled the fundamental question of our national identity. In the earlier struggle for our political rights, it was perhaps enough to be anti-British. Now that we face Independence, and the immense problems which it will bring, it has become absolutely essential that we should know whether we are West Indians. (as cited in Duke, 2015, p. 192)

One of the most critical enquiries was whether a regional awareness existed and, if so, how its significance compared to the numerous identities of the region's inhabitants.

Jamaica’s national identity has been profoundly shaped by its history of colonisation and slavery. The legacy of African enslavement, British colonialism, and subsequent independence in 1962 plays a central role in how Jamaicans conceptualise their nationhood. Rex Nettleford (1970) in his seminal work *Mirror, Mirror: Identity, Race, and Protest in Jamaica*, reasons that Jamaican identity is “creolized,” meaning it emerges from the blending of different cultural elements rather than a simple replication of either African or European models. Jamaicans are conflicted with defining their own nationhood outside of colonial structures. Nettleford (1970) and Smith (1960) describe it as a society composed of different cultural groups living side-by-side but unequally. They define it as a “plural society.” The national motto, Out of the Many, One People,” reflects an idealised multicultural vision of unity, though scholars often critique this as obscuring underlying racial and class inequalities.

### ***Small Island: A Short Summary***

*Small Island* (2004) by the British-Jamaican writer Andrea Levy intricately weaves together the lives of its main characters against the backdrop of post-World War II Britain and Jamaica, exploring themes of immigration, racism, and cultural identity. The story begins with young Queenie, who visits the British Empire Exhibition with her parents, introducing her to the complexities of race and colonialism. This early encounter sets the stage for her later experiences as she navigates her



identity as a white British woman in a changing society. Years later, in 1948, Hortense Joseph arrived in London from Jamaica, filled with hopes for a better life. However, she is met with disappointment when her husband, Gilbert, fails to greet her at the dock and the cramped living conditions they share. Hortense's backstory reveals her privileged yet emotionally cold upbringing in Jamaica, where she was raised by her father's wealthy relatives, fostering a deep desire for acceptance and belonging. As she adjusts to life in England, she struggles to reconcile her expectations with the harsh realities of her new environment.

Gilbert, Hortense's husband, has his own journey, having served in the RAF during the war. His experiences in the United States of America expose him to stark racial divides, while his time in Britain reveals a more complex social landscape. He befriends Queenie's father-in-law, Arthur, and becomes involved in the racial tensions that arise when American soldiers and black British soldiers clash in public spaces. Meanwhile, Queenie's life unfolds with her marriage to Bernard, which is rooted more in stability than love. As the war progresses, Queenie volunteers to help refugees, creating a sense of purpose that strains her marriage when Bernard returns home.

The narrative takes a pivotal turn when Queenie has a brief affair with Michael, a charismatic Jamaican officer, during her husband Bernard's absence, whom she believes to have fallen in the battle. This encounter leads to Queenie becoming pregnant, and when Bernard returns, he is confronted with the reality of her biracial child. Queenie's decision to give the baby to Gilbert and Hortense highlights the societal stigma surrounding race and the challenges of raising a biracial child in post-war Britain. Bernard's inability to accept the child underscores the deep-seated prejudices that permeate their lives. Ultimately, *Small Island* offers a poignant exploration of the intersections of race, class, and identity.

### **Cultural Mimicry in *Small Island*: Mimicry and the Illusion of British Identity**

The term "culture" is frequently employed in at least two senses in our everyday language. First, we refer to culturally skilled individuals and culturally rich environments, practices that suggest an awareness of the existence of socially valued behavioural and artistic pursuits. Accordingly, the most cultured people are typically found in big cities with prosperous populations. However, there is another, more anthropological, meaning of "culture" that is more comprehensive; in this sense, culture encompasses the traditions, beliefs, and customs, and artistic pursuits define a particular community; in other words, what sets a certain community away from others. In this second sense, culture is an integral part of everyone's life; in fact, it cannot exist without it (M. Mordecai & P. Mordecai, 2001). Matthew Arnold's notion of culture, as



articulated in his 1869 book *Culture and Anarchy*, presents culture as the pursuit of human perfection through the appreciation of “the best that has been thought and said.” Arnold envisioned culture as a civilising force, inherently tied to high intellectual and artistic achievements, and viewed it as a means of social cohesion and moral enlightenment. However, Andrea Levy’s *Small Island* disrupts and complicates this elitist and Eurocentric vision, exposing the exclusionary and hierarchical assumptions embedded within Arnold’s ideals. Through its depiction of postcolonial migration and racial tension, the novel interrogates who gets to define culture and whether it is, in fact, an open and unifying force or a mechanism of exclusion.

Through its Jamaican and British characters, the novel engages deeply with Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, culture, and identity, as well as the broader themes of cultural adaptation and appropriation. Bhabha argues that the coloniser encourages the colonised to imitate Western culture, but this mimicry is “almost the same, but not quite.” This creates an unstable identity in the many characters of Levy’s story, where the colonial subject is never entirely accepted by the dominant culture, in this case, that of the British. Mimicry and culture, along with national identity are the concepts mainly explored through the two major Jamaican migrant characters, Hortense Roberts and Gilbert Joseph, and their experiences and interactions with British society; the couple is an example of Bhabha’s *mimic man*. The colonial subjects adopt aspects of the British culture, only to find themselves rejected by the very nation they admire which leads to several crises as they exist in liminal spaces, neither fully British nor fully Jamaican.

Due to their colonial past and a blend of European and African cultural components, Jamaicans possess a distinct identity. The long tradition of colonialism has created a dual identity for African Jamaicans, who are simultaneously members of the Caribbean and the British Commonwealth. Spoken language, music, and the way individuals dress and behave all express this duality. As a result, Jamaicans and the English culture that colonised the island nation have a complicated connection. The subject of how Jamaicans of African origin have adapted to the English occupation and how this has impacted their sense of identity has been brought up by this complicated relationship. Therefore, it is evident that the local Jamaican population has been significantly affected by their decision to either embrace or reject the colonial legacy as they have chosen to either adapt to or completely reject English culture. At first sight, there appears to be a contrast between embracing their identity as members of the British Commonwealth and completely rejecting English culture. Others, on the other hand, completely reject it. This is an understatement of the situation, though. African Jamaicans most likely

find a balance between the two extremes, embracing some elements of the English culture while rejecting others (Çal, 2023).

The story of *Small Island* is mostly set in 1948 and centers on a Jamaican couple who immigrate to England after World War II. Their tale is intertwined with a white couple they meet in London. The West Indian couple arrived in England on the Empire Windrush. Gilbert served as a pilot during the war, and Hortense was a teacher in the Caribbean. Both are forced to reevaluate the values of their native culture, education, and upbringing after arriving in Britain. Growing up believing that England was their mother country, they found post-war London to be discriminatory and inhospitable, which is all the more tragic given that their family members served in the British military and were taught to respect them in colonial schools (Cinková, 2010).

Hortense Roberts, a light-skinned Jamaican woman and one of the central figures in this novel, embodies certain aspects of cultural mimicry. Cinková (2010) argues that, in Jamaica, Hortense draws her identity on the idea that she shares similarities with the white people since her skin tone is “warm honey,” like that of her ‘noble’ father as opposed to “bitter chocolate hue,” of her poor maid of a mother (*Small Island*, p. 23), which in Jamaican vernacular denoted a higher social standing. In contrast to the West Indies (Jamaica), where people were accustomed to distinguishing between skin tones, the British deliberately created only two racial divisions: white and coloured. For this reason, Hortense believes that Britain let her down, as she was a determined schoolteacher in Jamaica, yet in Britain she is continuously disparaged due to the colour of her skin and her educational credentials are deemed useless.

Since the coloniser’s culture is portrayed as more sophisticated and compelling, the colonised will attempt to mimic its culture. The expansion of the British Empire, the linguistic invasion of English, and the unconscious naturalisation of established values like civilisation and humanity had all contributed to the disparagement of the colonised people’s indigenous culture (Cinkova, 2010). On the other hand, this naturalisation has aided in the creation of categories of “primitive,” “savage,” and “native” (Ashcroft et al, p.3, as cited by Cinkova), which stood in binary opposition to civilisation and humanity. Conscious or unconscious subjugation, or cultural denigration, affects not just the culture but also the individual’s personality and sense of self. This etic standpoint, ethnocentrism, and the enforced paradigm of the superior Western culture have all contributed to the rationalisation of racial discrimination, colonial and imperial rule by making it appear as though history will enviably follow a natural order in which the strongest cultures will prevail while the weaker ones must perish (Cinkova, 2010).



In British colonial Jamaica, English education and cultural norms were imposed, leading many Jamaicans to adopt the British way of life. This, often, marginalised indigenous practices and redefined their identity in Western terms which served as a form of control as it ensured the colonised to remain dependent on the coloniser's validation while never achieving full equality. Prior to coming to England, Hortense and Gilbert believed that the 'Mother Country' was more developed and fundamentally superior to their own Jamaican culture and nation. Jamaican's as West Indians believed that,

[...] initially at any rate, the most assimilationist of all the coloured immigrant groups because of their cultural identification with Britain, an identification which was the product of slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean. The West Indians took their British citizenship seriously, and many regarded themselves not as strangers, but as kinds of Englishmen.... As one provincial spokesman put it, 'We are not immigrants in the true technical sense: after all, we are members of the realm, we are British.' (Deakin 1970, p.283 as cited in Toulis, 2020)

As colonial subjects, in the hopes of assimilating into British society, their only option was to mimic and adopt the British imperial customs and way of life since, "West Indians were perceived as possessing no authentic culture of their own, only an inferior version of British culture (Toulis, 2020, p. 17)." The couple in Levy's novel, though, comes to the understanding that the renowned culture they have been trained to respect, does not exist or is unavailable to coloured immigrants.

According to Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), the colonial subjects are encouraged to imitate the coloniser's culture. In *Small Island*, the colonised Jamaicans can never fully become British, and their mimicry unsettles colonial authority rather than affirming it. Hortense Roberts embodies this colonial mimicry being educated in Jamaica under British imperial rule, she believes that adopting British manners, speech, and behaviour will secure her a place in their society. Hortense holds a firm belief in British superiority, "I would be a teacher in England. A ladies' college. Where genteel women would sit attentively to hear me speak. [...] they would admire my cleverness. They should think me grand, calling me 'Miss Roberts'" (SI, p.134). Hortense assumes that her British education and refined manners will grant her social status in England. However, her cultural mimicry of the colonial rule proves to be

ineffective since the British do not accept her as one of their own. When she applies for a job as a schoolteacher, she witnesses this rejection, How long is the training in England? I asked her "Goodbye", she said, pointing a finger at the door. Must I go back to college? Really, Miss, I have just explained everything to you, you speak English? Have you not understood me? It's quite simple. There is no point in you asking me anything else. Now, please, I have a lot to do. Thank you. And she smiled at me, again! What fancy feigning [...] As I stood she rolled her eyes with the other women in the room. (*SI*, p. 383)

This moment reveals that despite her mimicry of British speech and customs; Hortense is still perceived as the "Other." Her belief in British civility is shattered, exposing the illusion of national belonging for colonial subjects. She can be as Anglicised as possible but will never be English. Hortense has an obsession with fitting into their culture and refuses to be treated as inferior and not a member of the coloniser's society. This causes a lot of conflicts mainly between her and her husband Gilbert who constantly reminds her of their people's inferiority and her own arrogance.

### **Culture in *Small Island***

Culture is a complex and contested concept that has been theorised across disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies. They, in their own way, highlighted different dimensions of culture, ranging from its symbolic, material, political aspects to the performative aspect.

Hortense, in particular, embodies an Arnoldian view of culture, at least initially. Raised in Jamaica with a colonial British education, she equates cultural refinement with proper speech, manners, and intellectual aspirations. Because she thinks her own culture is inferior, he attempts to fit in. She feels ashamed of her community and, consequently, of herself. She believes that her mastery or mimicry of English customs and values will grant her access to British society, a conviction rooted in the imperial ideology that Matthew Arnold's concept of culture implicitly supports. But, upon arrival in Britain, Hortense quickly realises that culture, as it operates in practice, is not an open path to self-betterment but a gatekeeping structure that maintains racial and social hierarchies. Despite her cultivated speech and aspirations, she is still regarded as an outsider, revealing the hypocrisy of a culture that claims universality while denying inclusion to colonial subjects. Hortense's cultivated demeanor is an act of mimicry, in Bhabha's sense, a near replication of Britishness. Her rejection reflects the reality that cultural mimicry does not bridge the gap between the coloniser and the colonised. Instead, the British cultural



superiority, as Arnold, for instance, upholds, is not an inclusive space of intellectual and moral perfection but a guarded fortress designed to exclude colonial subjects, no matter how well they adopt its customs.

Gilbert's experience further deconstructs Arnold's rigid cultural framework. Having fought for Britain in World War II in the Royal Air Force, he assumes that this service will earn him recognition as a cherished member of British society. Nevertheless, his encounters with racism and exclusion reveal that British culture is not based on shared ideals or moral progress but on deeply ingrained racial and class distinction. This contradicts Arnold's belief in culture as harmonising power, exposing how cultural superiority was historically weaponised to justify colonial rule and maintain a racialised social order. Gilbert engages in cultural mimicry, though his experience is more ironic and self-aware. As a soldier, he mimics British patriotism, believing that his service will earn him a place in the national identity. However, he quickly realises that Britishness is not defined by shared cultural values but by race and class. His mimicry of British national identity, much like Hortense's mimicry of British manners, does not grant him belonging.

Even Queenie and Bernard demonstrate the limitations of Arnold's ideal. Quennie, who interacts openly with Jamaicans and defies certain social norms, depicts that culture is not a fixed inheritance but a fluid and evolving entity. Bernard, by contrast, represents the rigidity of this perspective. He is clinging to a narrow, static vision of British culture that excludes and marginalises the very people upon which the empire depended. His resistance to cultural change mirrors Arnold's anxiety about anarchy. In *Small Island*, however, it is not cultural openness that creates chaos but it is the failure to adapt to a changing world.

### **-National Identity and the Colonial Subject**

In *The Question of Cultural Identity* (1992) Stuart Hall states that national identity is not fixed but constantly reshaped by historical and cultural forces. He argued that dominant groups such as colonial powers define what is "normal," marginalising alternative identities. For instance, British colonialism imposed a system where whiteness was valorised, forcing colonised subjects to negotiate their selfhood within oppressive frameworks. Andrea Levy's novel illustrates this through the Windrush generation, whose migration challenges British notions of nationhood.

Gilbert sees himself as part of Britain, but the white Britons do not recognise this identity. Gilbert's constant encounters with racism depict how British national identity is exclusive, despite colonial subjects being legally British. This reflects Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" which posits that nations are not natural entities but rather socially constructed, often excluding those who do not fit the dominant racial or cultural image. Gilbert tries to assimilate and adopt the culture,



adapting (or being pressured to adapt) to the language, values, and behaviours of the dominant society. He is suppressing some aspects of his original cultural identity to conform to the dominant (here white British) norms which is frequently demanded by the 'host' society as a condition of acceptance. Though assimilation is expected of them by the white British majority, he and Hortense resist full assimilation; in particular Gilbert, who insists on being treated with respect without having to abandon his cultural background. The American sociologist Richard Alba (2003) in his book *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation in Contemporary Immigration* along with Victor Nee point out that assimilation is not one-sided. While immigrants may adopt aspects of the host culture, the mainstream society must also change and accommodate diversity. The British mainstream does not significantly adapt to the arrival of Caribbean migrants. Characters like Hortense and Gilbert are expected to conform without the host society meeting them halfway. Gilbert seeks inclusion through service, speech, and work ethic but faces racial barriers. The British fail to recognise his contribution, revealing the failure of reciprocal assimilation.

Parallel to Gilbert, Hortense grows up in colonial Jamaica where she is taught to revere British culture. She internalises the belief that being British is synonymous with being civilised, educated, and superior. Fanon claimed that the colonised people mimic the coloniser's culture, believing it will grant them status. This is evident when, Hortense assumes that by adopting British manners and education, she will be accepted as one of them in all aspects of life. Her perception of national identity is hierarchical, as she considers herself more British than other Jamaicans due to her different upbringing and formal education as well as her light skin. Yet, this sense of superiority that she feels is shattered when she arrives in England and is perceived as the other,

Ernest Renan, in his seminal lecture "What is a Nation?" (1882), argues that a nation is not defined by race, language, or geography, but by a 'collective will,' a shared sense of belonging, and a willingness to coexist. He emphasised the importance of forgetting historical grievances and embracing a shared future, suggesting that nations are constructed through narratives of unity and common purpose. Levy's novel, however, does not depict this idealised vision of the nation by revealing the exclusionary practices that underpin the British national identity. Hortense and Gilbert arrive in Britain with a colonial education that instills in them a belief in the "mother country" as a land of opportunity and belonging. Gilbert's assertion that "Britain is [their] Mother Country. [They] are British but ... live in Jamaica" (*SI*, p. 127) reflects his internalisation of this narrative. Nevertheless, his experience and the personal discrimination he witnesses reveal the hollowness of Renan's



so-called “collective will.” The British nation, as Levy portrays it, is not a unified but a fractured construct built on the inclusion of only its own. Hortense’s experience further highlights this critique and Levy, thus, depicts the nation as a site of contestation, where promises of unity and belonging are continually deferred. These conflicts create identity crises in most of the characters.

### **The Dissolution of National Identity**

Homi Bhabha’s theory of postcolonial identity finds powerful expression in Levy’s novel. Her work challenges the rigid notion of Britishness, revealing it to be an unstable and contested construct, especially in the face of postwar migration. Levy’s interwoven narratives expose Britain’s struggle to reconcile its imperial self-image with the realities of a multicultural society. This supports Bhabha’s argument that there is a space “in-between the designations of identity” (p.4), and illustrates that national identity, for instance, is not a fixed essence but a discursive and performative construct prone to fragmentation, cultural hybridity.

A key way the author Levy depicts this dissolution is through the postwar disillusionment of characters like Bernard, who clings to an outdated, monolithic sense of British identity. His inability to accept the presence of Black Jamaicans in London reflects an anxiety over the erosion of a perceived racial and cultural purity. Bernard’s unbending nationalism is rooted in an imperial nostalgia that can no longer sustain itself in the reality of changing Britain. His discomfort mirrors what Bhabha describes as the unhomeliness of national identity which is the moment when the boundaries of self and nation are no longer secure, leading to a crisis of belonging (1994, p.8). In contrast, Gilbert and Hortense’s arrival in Britain destabilises the very idea of Britishness. Raised to believe in the superiority of the colonial power, they assume that migration to the “mother country” will be a homecoming. Instead, they are confronted with discrimination and marginalization, which underlines the hypocrisy of a nation that used its colonies for wartime support but refuses to extend the privileges of citizenship to its former subjects. Their presence forces Britain to confront its own hybridity, revealing that British identity was never purely English but always shaped by its colonial entanglements. This aligns with Bhabha’s (1994) concept of third space, where identity is negotiated and redefined rather than inherited as a stable, essential category. Gilbert’s and Hortense’s attempts at assimilation show that it is not a linear process, and that cultural negotiation happens in hybrid, contested spaces rather than through total absorption into the dominant culture. This third space is where new cultural meaning and identities emerge through the interaction of differing cultures, often under conditions of power imbalance. The two characters negotiate being both British and Jamaican, neither fully



belonging to either. Their identities are reimagined rather than conformed.

Paul Gilroy is a prominent British scholar and cultural theorist best known for his work on race, identity, and particularly for his concept of the 'Black Atlantic.' His theories challenge traditional notions of race, nationhood, and culture, where he emphasises the fluid, interconnected, and hybrid nature of identity in the context of the African diaspora. In his seminal work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), he introduces the concept of 'Black Atlantic' as a transnational, intercultural space shaped by the historical experience of slavery, colonialism, and migration. This framework rejects the idea of fixed national or racial identities, instead emphasising the interconnectedness of African, American, Caribbean, and European cultures. Gilroy's key idea is that the Black Atlantic is a "counterculture of modernity," a space where African diasporic peoples have created hybrid cultural forms (e.g., music, literature, art) that transcend national boundaries. The scholar argues that the African diaspora cannot be understood within the confines of a single nation or culture but must be seen as a dynamic, transnational network. Building on W.E.B. Du Bois's concept, Gilroy investigated that "double consciousness," a sense of being both inside and outside the dominant culture. For Gilroy, this duality is not just a psychological condition but a structural feature of the coloured people's experience in the modern world. These individuals and communities often navigate conflicting identities as they are torn between their heritages and the lived experience in Western societies. This duality, however, is not merely a source of alienation but also a site of creativity and resistance. Andrea Levy's characters Hortense and Gilbert embody this double consciousness as they struggle to reconcile their Jamaican identities with their aspiration to belong in Britain as can be seen in one of Hortense's judgments towards Gilbert while at the same time only praising herself, Anyone hearing Gilbert Joseph speak would know without hesitation that this man was not English. No matter that he is dressed in his best suit, his hair greased, his fingernails clean, he talked (and walked) in a rough Jamaican way. Whereas I, since arriving in this country, had determined to speak in an English manner. It was of no use to imitate the way of speaking of those about me, for too many people I encountered spoke as a Cockney would. All fine diction lost in a low-class slurring garble. No. To speak English properly as the high-class, I resolved to listen to the language at its finest. Every day my wireless was tuned to the most exemplary English in



the known world (SI, p. 378)

Hortense is deeply aware of how others perceive them and this awareness shows that they have internalised the gaze of the dominant English culture and it is not a neutral gaze but one that judges, categorises, and excludes. She even goes so far as to reject not only her own way of speaking her mother tongue but the Cockney dialect as she believes it represents a lower social class. Hortense is not adopting English speech for fun but as a survival strategy where she attempts to assimilate into the dominant culture by not only practicing her speech through media outlets but almost pretending to be someone else and denying her Jamaican identity.

Gilroy (1994), like many scholars before him such as Stuart Hall, critiques the idea that race and nationality are fixed categories with inherent cultural traits. He claims that these are social constructs shaped by historical and political forces, and that cultural identities are always hybrid and in a state of constant evolution. The theorist rejects the conception of 'pure' racial or national identities, which he sees as a process rather than fixed. What he advocates for is a cosmopolitan approach to identity; one that embraces diversity and rejects exclusionary nationalism. He envisions a world where cultural differences are celebrated rather than feared, and where identity is understood as fluid and relational, as exemplified by Queenie's relationship with Gilbert and her mixed-race child can be seen as an example of these ideas and a challenge to the racial hierarchies in post-war Britain.

In the context of *Small Island*, Gilroy's theories help illuminate the experience of Levy's characters as they navigate fractured identities of the postcolonial displacement, revealing the enduring impact of colonialism. Through the lens of Paul Gilroy's theoretical framework, the novel emerges as a profound study of the dissolution of fixed national identities and the emergence of hybrid, diasporic subjectivities. The characters are caught between the colonial myths of Britishness and the realities of racial segregation, exemplifying the tension and possibilities of Gilroy's theories, offering a nuanced critique of the empire and its aftermath. For instance, his concept of Black Atlantic provides a compelling framework for understanding the transnational identities of the Jamaican Hortense and Gilbert. Those two migrating from Jamaica to Britain carry with them the cultural and psychological imprints of colonialism, yet their experience in the "mother country" reveal the instability of British national identity. Gilbert's service in the RAF during WWII exemplifies the paradox of colonial loyalty. As a subject of the British Empire, he enlists with the expectation of reciprocity and belonging, only to encounter pervasive discrimination. Gilbert describes



this disappointment when he utters the myth of the “Mother Country” followed by the dry reality,  
Let me ask you to imagine this. Living far from you is a beloved relative whom you have never met. Yet this relation is so dear a kin she is known as Mother. Your own mummy talks of Mother all the time. 'Oh Mother is a beautiful woman-refined, mannerly and cultured.' Your daddy tells you, ' Mother thinks of you as her children; like the Lord above she takes care of you from afar.' There are many valorous stories told of her, which enthrall grown men as well as children...Then one day you hear Mother calling- she is troubled, she need your help. Your mummy, your daddy say go. Leave home, leave familiar, leave love. Travel seas with waves that swell about you as substantial as concrete buildings. Shiver, tire, hunger- for no sacrifice is too much to see you at Mother's needy side. This surely is adventure. After all you have heard, can you imagine, can you believe, soon, soon you will meet Mother? The filthy tramp that eventually greets you is she. Ragged, old, and dusty as the long dead. Mother has a blackened eye, bad breath and one lone tooth that waves in her head when she speaks. Can this be that fabled relation you heard so much of? This twisted- crooked weary woman. This stinking cantankerous hag. She offers you no comfort after your journey. No smile, no welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says, 'who the bloody hell are you?' (*SI*, pp.111-112)

This betrayal represents the hypocrisy of imperial rhetoric, which demands allegiance while denying equality. Gilbert's experience reflects the Black Atlantic counterculture of modernity, where their contributions are being exploited and erased.

The concept that the dominating colonial authority is a civilising force among its undeveloped colonies is fostered by institutions and cultural standards in both Jamaican and British societies. Jamaican culture, particularly the educated class where Hortense was raised, is devoted to colonial ideology as a result of decades of British domination and propaganda. Despite Hortense's conception of civilisation being based on mimicking the British, she is far more civilised than Queenie and her new neighbours in terms of appearance and etiquette. This brings to mind Queenie's explanation of the British Empire Exhibition. One of the performers addresses Queenie in impeccable English and points Graham in the direction of a bathroom, but the boy is unable to locate it and needs to "wee behind some bins," while her adolescent guides, Emily and Graham, entertain themselves by making fun of the black actors in the Africa exhibit. The man Queenie has been taught to view as inferior has mastered British manners more effectively than she has, even if she is unaware of this at the time (Fondo, 2014).



At first, Hortense and Gilbert think that they can be accepted by behaving as British as possible, but they soon learn that the majority of British people are so certain of their innate superiority that they fail to see that the Josephs are more cultivated than they are by accepted standards. This is particularly true with Bernard, who calls Gilbert a "cheeky blighter" (*SI*, p. 397) when he tries to shake hands and obnoxiously closes the door in response, mistaking his repeated polite gestures for indiscretion.

In the end, Hortense and Gilbert's time in England reveals a failure of human compassion, as well as the limitation of British customs. By the end, they are creating an uncertain sense of security and contentment, but they do it by connecting with other members of the immigrant community rather than because their hosts have made any kind of welcome gesture. The Josephs will not establish a life in England because of British "civilisation," but rather in spite of it. Britain experienced racial and national anxiety as a result of its encounter with the *Other* on their own land, which raised concerns over who was entitled to the term "white Englishness" (p. 16 as cited in Umur, 2020). The authorities feared that the lines separating coloniser and colonised people may blur. This dread complicated the distinction between the empire at the top of the hierarchy and its colonized subjects that aspired to climb up this order and become equals. Instead of viewing these immigrants as the long-awaited children, Britain saw them as foreigners who brought colour issues with them (Umur, 2020).

The notion of the 'Other' is central to the novel's examination of identity, belonging, and the legacy of colonialism. It interrogates how the 'Other' is constructed through cultural, racial, and national orders. The experiences of the Jamaican characters as well as the British characters reveal how the 'Other' is both a site of marginalisation and the locus of resistance. Bhabha's concept of mimicry illuminates the dynamics of Othering in the novel. The theorist claims that mimicry, the colonised adoption of the coloniser's culture, produces "partial presence" that is both similar to and different from the coloniser. This ambivalence disrupts the authority of the colonial power, exposing the constructed nature of cultural superiority. Hortense's mimicry of British sophistication demonstrates this ambivalence. Her careful pronunciation, her insistence on propriety, and her disdain for "common" behaviour reflect her internalisation of colonial ideals. However, her mimicry is never complete; her accent, skin colour, and cultural background mark her as perpetually 'Other'. This partial presence, as Bhabha describes it, undermines the myth of British cultural superiority, revealing a construct sustained by exclusion.

As mentioned before , the concept of the Other is central to postcolonial theory, and in Bhabha’s work the ‘Other’ is not simply the colonised subject but a complex construct formed within the discourse of colonial power, where the coloniser defines itself in opposition to this ‘Other.’ The postcolonial theorist further explains that colonial discourse seeks to fix the identity of the colonised as the ‘Other’ through stereotypes, which serves to both know and control the people under the rule of colonisation. In his essay “The Other Question” (1983), he states how “the stereotype, which is a major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification, that vacillates what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (p.293, as cited in Newton, 1997). In this fixity the colonised is essentialised, made static, timeless, and fundamentally different. The colonised is frozen into an unchanging, inferior position to justify domination which is achieved through racial essentialism, e.g., Black people as inherently primitive, and cultural infantilisation, e.g., colonized people as “children” needing guidance. In *Small Island*, this can be seen when, despite his wartime heroism, Gilbert is reduced to a racial caricature as the jolly Black soldier who is tolerated but never equal. His British comrades mock his accent while depending on his labour, exposing the hypocrisy of colonial gratitude (Talec, n.d). When Gilbert is called a racial slur by a man he rescues, this moment depicts how his identity is fixed as perpetually foreign, no matter his contributions and achievements. Hortense’s imitation attempts of British ideals are met with similar disdain. The British, here represented by Queenie’s husband, Bernard, label her as “overdressed” and “ridiculous” (*SI*, p. 394), revealing how stereotypes perpetuate cultural exclusion. Bhabha’s mimicry theory explains how colonised subjects destabilises stereotypes by imperfectly replicating the coloniser’s culture. The Jamaican characters’ exaggerated imitation of British culture turns mimicry into mockery as well as their failed assimilation. Mimicry is both disruptive and unsettling to colonial authority and British hegemony, yet it simultaneously upholds it these systems, creating ambivalence that poses a threat by blurring the boundaries between the colonial power and its subjects.



## Conclusion

In *Small Island*, Andrea Levy dramatises the profound tension between postcolonial subjects and the fragile construction of British national identity, revealing how the presence of the racialised “Other” unsettles the myth of a homogenous, imperial Britain. The Characters Hortense and Gilbert arrive in the “motherland” mimicking the manners, speech, and values instilled by colonial education exemplifying Homi Bhabha’s theory of cultural mimicry, a form of imitation that is “almost the same, but not quite.” Hortense and Gilbert arrive in postwar Britain, the colonial “motherland,” expecting to belong. They are British citizens, yet treated as alien intrusion as their very presence destabilises white British identity, which had relied on imperial hierarchies that kept the colonised at a distance. This mimicry both depicts the cracks of imperial authority and disrupts the boundaries of national belonging, as the colonised subjects refuse to conform to the roles assigned to them. Their very presence transforms the nation into a hybrid zone where cultural identities are contested, negotiated, and redefined. As these characters assert their place within the country, the supposed unity of the British identity begins to dissolve under the weight of its own contradictions, reflecting that full assimilation is not only incomplete but impossible under a structure built on exclusion. Ultimately, *Small Island* challenges the foundations of Britishness, showing that national identity, far from being stable and pure, is always in flux, affected by its colonial past and reshaped by multicultural futures it cannot contain.

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