17BAE01 GCE English Literature

Folder 5

English Literature Coursework

"For West Indian immigrants, their arrival to Britain was seen as a return to the mother country"- With reference to your wider reading around Small Island by Andrea Levy and The Lonely Londoners by Sam Selvon, compare how Levy and Selvon present the difficulties immigrants face when trying to integrate into British life.

Within Small Island, by Andrea Levy, and The Lonely Londoners, by Sam Selvon, the authors present the difficulties immigrants face when integrating into Great British society and life through the presentation of racially oppressive British London society. The oppressive nature displayed within the novel's, is reflected through either author's depiction of the way in which black immigrants were treated within the fictional societies set. The presentation, exposing the treatment of the characters within the novels, allows Levy and Selvon to establish how racially oppressive societies can affect the integration of immigrants into 1948 British life.

The presentation of both racial prejudice and racially oppressive attitudes towards immigrants in mid-20th century London is transparent throughout either novel. In Small Island, Levy makes consistent use of semantic fields of racism, as well as racial connotations and consistently demonstrates them in the novels, doing so to emphasise the casual nature of 1940 British London society and its use of racism, and racial prejudice. Levy employs the characters of Hortense and Gilbert-both immigrants- as being subjected to casual racism throughout, such as "Have you seen Sugar? She's one of you", exploiting Queenie's narrative to present the casual racism, by labelling another black character "Sugar" as "one of" Hortense's fellow immigrants, through her speech. The inclusion of casual racism is significant, as Levy does so to be able to depict the oppressive nature of British London society at that time, and their treatment of foreign immigrants. Similarly, Levy's utilisation of Queenie is indicative, of the casual racism, also such as "big nigger man" and "a monkey man" that is within British society. It is significant that Levy operates her depiction of casual racism through the inclusion of racist connotations by using the speech of characters within the novel. It allows Levy to emphasise the oppressive nature, within British societies, and the way in which British Londoners verbally treated foreign immigrants at the time of 1948. The depiction of casual racism, enables Levy to demonstrate the difficulty immigrants face when adjusting to British life post World War Two, as the oppressive nature of the society symbolises the predicament of foreigners immigrating to London, and trying to integrate into normal British life- especially when they are subject to racism even on a casual scale.

Whilst Levy's presentation of 1948 Britain conveys a more aggressive, racially oppressive nature, due to the depiction of casual racism and racial prejudice, Selvon's portrayal of British society post-World War Two employs a more subtle, yet equally as effective method of production. In the Lonely Londoners, Selvon purposely congregates the black character's in the novel together, reflecting the difficulty for black people to integrate with opposing ethnic groups in London- particularly white British. The presentation of black people within the novel being labelled as the "other", particularly allows Selvon to convey the way in which the likes of black immigrants at the time were out casted, and forced to merge together into their own ethnic groups. The depiction of black people in such a way in the novel, is reinforced through the speech of the protagonist, Moses, who expresses the way in which fellow ethnic minorities "divide up in little worlds, and you stay in the world where you belong", ultimately stemming by process of an initial social segregation. Though there is little presentation of direct racial oppression, of which is conveyed throughout Small Island, Selvon best displays the difficulty immigrants faced integrating into British life at that time, through his utilisation of the character's in the novel and the way in which they were racially segregated. Selvon

is able to therefore present the difficulty that people of different races, whom immigrated to Britain at the time of 1958 had when trying to adjust and integrate into normal British cultures and with fellow British people.

In Small Island, Andrea Levy makes use of traditional Caribbean dialect in order to be able to portray the difficulties in language communication and accent differentiation between the foreign protagonists, and other characters in the novel. The barrier between the characters from post-war and during-war British London society and the foreign characters in the novel is transparent through the presentation of both the dialect and idiolect. Levy best demonstrates the difficulty of communication between immigrants and British citizens through the dialect of Hortense. Despite being presented as a well-educated and grammatically fluent character in Small Island, Levy displays Hortense's strong Jamaican dialect, "the white man looked perplexed. 'You what, love?' he said, as if I had been speaking in tongues" and "She can't understand what I'm saying... they're not civilised" as being fundamental in her inability to obtain a teaching job as well as getting through day to day life. Levy utilises Hortense's dialect to reflect the way in which Hortense struggles to communicate with British Londoner's around her. This enables Levy convey the difficulties both men and women from countries within the British Commonwealth such as Jamaica, the Trinidad as well as the West Indies face when trying to integrate into British societies with contrary cultures and often prejudice disregards for those trying to find a new life in "the mother country".

In the novels, Levy and Selvon use of contrasting narrative technique's in order to fluently illustrate the contextual issues that arises from them- such as the difficulty immigrants such as the protagonists within the novels, face when trying to integrate into British life. In The Lonely Londoners, Selvon uses a third person narrative technique which is presented noticeably as a dialect form close to the idiolect of himself; enabling him to articulate a novel personal to himself. This therefore intensifies the importance of Selvon's depiction of the integration of immigrants into British cultures and societies not only to the readers; but to him. This personalisation stems from Selvon's individual Trinidadian roots, allowing him to portray the difficulty of the foreign characters in the novel such as Moses and Galahad and their difficulty of adjusting to a new life in Britain with different traditions with an individualistic quality. The significance of Selvon's authenticity of the narrative voice in The Lonely Londoners is critically approved by many, as whole The Lonely Londoners "represented a major step forward in the process of linguistic and cultural decolonization" in the view of Susheila Nasta in her 'Introduction of Sam Selvon: The Lonely Londoners' as well as being described as 'reshaping the English language for his purposes by writing in phonetic West Indian Creole' by Literature critique Kate Kelsall. Furthermore, this narrative technique used by Selvon enables his personal foreign language to be integrated into the language of the foreign characters in the novel and thus entices the reader into a personalized yet fictional setting, with Selvon almost personifying himself into the characters without doing so.

Contrastingly Andrea Levy uses a variety of first person narratives, utilising the narrative voice of Hortense, Gilbert, Queenie and Bernard in order to reflect on different perspectives and personal accounts of events within the novel. Levy's use of Hortense's narrative voice allows her to display the issues deriving from Hortense's character integrating into British society. The use of the noun "superiority" in Hortense's expression "those white women whose superiority encircled them like an aureole" signifies the predicament Levy presents Hortense within, as she faces a constant struggle integrating into British life, as well as signifying the way in which British women look down on her throughout the novel. Furthermore "this working white man could have thought me so stupid" expressed by Hortense's narrative creates a sense of social oppression within the novel with the view that not only white women but also white men view her as "stupid", with racial and prejudice

connotations deriving from this. It is also significant that Levy makes use of a variety of narrative voices, as the personal sentiment of Hortense and Gilbert, allows Levy to present the concept that foreign immigrants may have had, whilst adapting to oppressive British life.

The presentation of socially oppressive societies, enables Levy and Selvon to display the difficulty, of immigrants during post-war Great Britain, trying to integrate into normal post-war Great British life. The societies, such as the racial prejudice society conveyed throughout Small Island and the social segregation, due to racial diversity in The Lonely Londoners, help present the nature of the societies, that foreign people had to try and adjust to. Both novels allow a depiction of how society often went against such racial integration, reflecting how foreigners in real life, were treated through the treatment of the characters in the novels. Whilst "the message of The Lonely Londoners is even more vital today than in 50s Britain"- in the view of Helon Habila, due to the way it symbolises social and ethnical segregation, which can still be applied to British societies in the modern day, Small Island instead allows a representation of the way in which Britain has moved a long way forward and away from the racial prejudice, still occurrent in mid-20th century Britain. Potentially it can be said that the novels are applicable to the time of 1940's and 1950's Britain, in the way in which they symbolise societies in London and elsewhere at that time, however also represent societies still to this day, in England. Thus, both Small Island and The Lonely Londoners act as symbolic of societies at that time, the way societies have moved forward since then, however also how the racial oppression explicit within them can still be seen in modern day multicultural societies in Great Britain.

Word Count – 1583 words

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