

Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation

Mark Stein

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Mark Stein's *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* attracts as much by its striking cover design as by the wealth of information and analysis between its covers. The reproduction of Christopher Corr's 1998 painting "Shopping by Tube or Bus" on the cover, comprising scenes of London that present a vision of "consumption without community," is analyzed as an "impulse to parade London's multiethnic composition much in the way its wares are displayed" (179). This cover is but one indication of the author's commitment to read different facets of Britain's multiculturalism through its literature, specifically the work of black British novelists from 1985 onwards.

Stein clearly articulates the central premises of the work in the introduction: the performative function of articulating new subject positions and specifying how these are reflected in and through the transformation of British society. The black British novel, comprising literature produced by successive generations of Asian, African, and Caribbean diasporic authors in Britain, is demonstrated as accomplishing these aims by transforming the structure of the *bildungsroman*. One of the most common objections to this analytical framework could be the applicability of a specifically European and male author-centric connotation of the *bildungsroman* genre to works neither exclusively produced by men nor by authors who identify themselves as exclusively European. These theoretical objections are addressed by the author at the very outset in the admission that the *bildungsroman* "had for a long time been thought of as the novel of formation of a young, white man" and that speaking of adaptations of this form in black British literature "run(s) the risk of inflicting yet another Eurocentric body of thought onto post-colonial texts" (23). By proposing the "novel of transformation" as an adaptation of the *bildungsroman* and succinctly listing its distinct features as "radical generational conflict," "voicing an identity" and symbolically "carving out space" or the "creation of a public sphere," Stein lays out the grounds of his arguments about the authors and texts discussed in the subsequent chapters (30).

The author's attention to literary debates crucial to black British studies gives a dialogic quality to certain sections of the book. Some of these debates involve a direct dialogue between two literary figures such as Fred D'Aguiar and David Dabydeen on the distinct category "black

British Literature” or the differing ideological opinions on black British literature offered by Diran Adebayo and Kwame Dawes (10-11; 101-104). Other debates focus on juxtaposing the ideas of authors who may not have directly addressed each other but whose writings comprise implicit modes of address by expressing contrasting views on issues such as literary ancestry, as in the case of George Lamming and Caryl Phillips in the essay “Following On: The Legacy of Lamming and Selvon” (96). Documentation of these debates is essential for scholars pursuing research in the area of black British literature.

One of the strengths of the book is its documentation of cultural work other than fiction that engages with aspects of British multiculturalism. To cite a few examples, the discussion of Andrea Levy and Bernardine Evaristo’s work within the paradigm of the black British novel of transformation is preceded by an extended analysis of Caribbean British poet Grace Nichols’s short poem “Epilogue” which helps Stein thematise voice, language, and history in Levy’s *Fruit of the Lemon* and Evaristo’s *Lara*. In the same way Stein elaborates upon the concept of “postethnicity”—denunciation of the markers of ethnicity through irony and parody—in Hanif Kureishi’s work by looking at the reception of the artist Chris Ofili. He also reads the display of colonial history at the National Maritime and Museum Gallery in Greenwich, London to offer an interpretation of David Dabydeen’s novel *The Intended* as intertextually referencing Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Reading visuality through museum exhibits, films, sketches, and paintings is not only a means of focusing on visible markers of ethnic difference but also a way of merging literary criticism and cultural studies along the scrupulous interpretative routes charted in the chapters.

Another feature of this work is its attention to gender concerns. A conscious attention to relatively less well-known black women authors like Levy and Evaristo in an early chapter as well as a brief but trenchant critique of the commodity status of the more famous Zadie Smith in the conclusion frames Stein’s examination of the works of Kureishi and Dabydeen. There is an acute awareness of ethnicity, gender and sexuality as interconnected modalities both within works analyzed as well as in the “*circuits* of authorization” where there is an “‘enforced glamour’ projected onto black and Asian Britons” such that “black British literature has also become an object of desire” as revealed in the multiplicity of publishing options available to younger authors (183).

Exploring the literary antecedents, contemporary forms, cultural contexts, and social effects of black British fiction as an object of desire, Stein’s study contributes to the growing body of post-colonial works focusing on diasporic fiction engaging with the continued social consequences of colonial history in Britain at the turn of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century.