

SHIFTING “LIMITS OF TOLERANCE AND BELONGING” IN ANDREA LEVY’S FICTION: AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE REFUGEE IN “LOOSE CHANGE”

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ABSTRACT

Andrea Levy’s short story “Loose Change” (2014) focuses on an unsettling encounter between the narrator, a black British woman, who identifies herself as a “Londoner,” and a homeless refugee woman, Laylor, from Uzbekistan. It is my claim that the unsympathetic attitude of the narrator to a refugee woman in need of help is indicative of the text’s emphasis on “relational” and “historically variable” positioning of diasporic formations (Brah, 1996, p. 180) and of Levy’s brave tackling of the following question raised by Alison Donnell: “Does the success that writers and other cultural practitioners have had in ensuring that the black in black Britishness has now arrived at a point of much fuller and complex self-representation, mean that black writers no longer need to contest the nation?” (Donnell, 2002, p. 17). In “Loose Change,” Levy continues with contesting the nation, yet this time her emphasis falls upon “a new group of people in Britain that seem to mark the limits of tolerance and belonging, the threshold between in and out” (Donnell, 2002, p. 17); i.e. the refugee.

Keywords: Andrea Levy, Six Stories and an Essay, “Loose Change,” black British, the figure of the refugee

ANDREA LEVY’NİN ROMAN VE ÖYKÜLERİNDE HOŞGÖRÜ VE AİDİYETİN DEĞİŞKEN SINIRLARI: “LOOSE CHANGE” VE MÜLTECİ FİĞÜRÜ

ÖZ

Andrea Levy’nin “Loose Change” (2014) adlı öyküsü kendini “Londralı” olarak tanımlayan siyah Britanyalı anlatıcı ile Özbekistan’dan Londra’ya kaçmak zorunda kalmış Laylor adlı evsiz bir mülteci kadın arasındaki tedirgin edici bir karşılaşmayı konu eder. Bu çalışmanın öne sürdüğü iddia şu şekilde ifade edilebilir: metindeki anlatıcı-karakterin yardıma muhtaç bir mülteciye gösterdiği hoşgörüsüz tavır, diasporik oluşumların toplumlardaki “ilişkisel” ve “tarihsel olarak değişiklik gösteren” (Brah, 1996, s. 180) konumlandırılmalarının altını çizmektedir. Buna ek olarak, Levy’nin söz konusu öyküsü Alison Donnell’in yönelttiği şu soruya da cesur bir

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yanıt niteliği taşır: “Kültürel alanda ürünler verenlerin ‘siyah Britanyalı’ kimliğindeki ‘siyah’ın artık çok daha kapsamlı ve katmanlı bir temsiliyet kazanmasını sağlamaları, siyah yazarların ‘ulus’u artık sorunsallaştırmalarına gerek olmadığı anlamına mı gelir?” (Donnell, 2002, s. 17). Levy, “Loose Change” adlı öyküsünde ulusu sorunsallaştırmaya devam eder; ancak, bu kez vurgulanan nokta “Britanya’da hoşgörü ve aidiyetin sınırlarını, içerisi ve dışarısı arasındaki eşiği belirleyen yeni bir grup insan,” (Donnell, 2002, s. 17) yani, mültecilerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Andrea Levy, *Six Stories and an Essay*, “Loose Change,” siyah Britanyalı, mülteci figürü

Introduction

Focusing on “Loose Change,” a short story appearing in Andrea Levy’s most recent book, *Six Stories and an Essay* (2014), this paper aims to foreground the emergence of a new dimension in the trajectory of Levy’s fiction regarding her contestation of nativist discourses. It has already been pointed out that in her fiction there is an increasing engagement with the legacy of the British Empire from a postcolonial perspective.² While her early novels, *Every Light in the House Burnin’* (1994) and *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996), foreground the shared culture of daily life as the element that makes one feel connected to a national community, her more recent novels, *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), *Small Island* (2004) and *The Long Song* (2010) undermine insular narratives of “Englishness” and invite the audience to view British imperial history as constitutive of racial hierarchies in contemporary Britain. Like all her stories that are set in present-day Britain, “Loose Change,” too, deals with otherization; yet, in this text, the other is not a black British character. The story focuses on an unsettling encounter between the narrator, a black British woman, who identifies herself as a “Londoner,” and a homeless refugee woman, Laylor, from Uzbekistan. It is my claim that the black narrator’s unsympathetic attitude to Laylor is indicative of the text’s emphasis on “relational” and “historically variable” positioning of diasporic formations (Brah, 1996, p. 180) and of Levy’s brave tackling of the following question raised by Alison Donnell:

² See M. Perfect’s “‘Fold the Paper and Pass It on’: Historical Silences and the Contrapuntal in Andrea Levy’s Fiction” (2010) and E. Öztapak-Avcı’s “‘Playing Bad for White Ears’: A Study of the Narratee in Andrea Levy’s *The Long Song*” (2017).

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“Does the success that writers and other cultural practitioners have had in ensuring that the black in black Britishness has now arrived at a point of much fuller and complex self-representation, mean that black writers no longer need to contest the nation?” (Donnell, 2002, p. 17). In “Loose Change,” Levy continues with contesting the nation, yet this time her emphasis falls upon “a new group of people in Britain that seem to mark the limits of tolerance and belonging, the threshold between in and out” (Donnell, 2002, p. 17); i.e. the refugee.

In his influential article “New Ethnicities” (1989/1996) Stuart Hall identifies a shift in black cultural politics in Britain from what he calls “the struggle to come into representation” (1989/1996, p. 441) to “a politics of representation” (1989/1996, p. 442). Both “moments”/ “phases” are “rooted in the politics of anti-racism and the post-war black experience in Britain” (p. 441) and they “constantly overlap and interweave” (1989/1996, p. 441); yet, there is still a significant difference between the two. The first moment, Hall argues, is characterized by “a critique of the way blacks were positioned as the unspoken and invisible ‘other’ of predominantly white aesthetic and cultural discourses” (1989/1996, p. 441). Therefore, this moment of black cultural politics in Britain is constituted by cultural practices that are designed to “challenge, resist, and, where possible, to transform the dominant regimes of representation” (1989/1996, p. 442). The second moment, on the other hand, which emerges as a consequence of the encounter between black cultural politics and critical cultural theory, marks “the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject” (1989/1996, p. 443) because it now comes to the fore that black is a social *construct*, which “cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories” (1989/1996, p. 443). As a corollary to this understanding of the term “black,” in the second phase of black cultural politics in Britain, the issue of race is approached in engagement with other social categories: it is now recognized that the racial axis always intersects with other axes of hierarchies such as class, gender, and ethnicity (1989/1996, p. 444).

Alison Donnell’s more recent piece “Nation and Contestation” (2002) maps the shifts in black cultural politics in Britain, as well. She identifies a shift from a “struggle for rights” to a “struggle for identity” and connects it to changing claims of black people in Britain both to being black and being British. Like Hall, who argues that the unifying notion of “the black experience” (in the first moment)

functions as a means to organize a “politics of resistance” among groups and communities with very different ethnic identities who are all exposed to racism and marginalization, Donnell, too, holds that the term “black” invoked “alliance and solidarity among dispersed groups of people sharing common historical experiences of British racism” (2002, p. 11). Donnell historicizes this specific understanding and employment of “black” arguing that it was predominant in Britain between the 1950s and mid-1970s. She also locates her discussion into a larger framework of national identity and emphasizes that in these discourses where “black” signifies a collective political front against racism, “black was an identity at odds with, or at best, in negotiation with Britishness” (2002, p. 11). According to Donnell, during this period, black intellectuals and writers in Britain “were perhaps not interested in establishing new national identities; in a sense this was a time when international, transnational, and cosmopolitan identifications seemed both more exciting and useful” (2002, p. 12). Starting from the mid-seventies onward, however, the sense of “being black in Britain” was replaced, Donnell argues, by the sense of “being black British” (2002, p. 11). The second generation, unlike their parents, demanded Britain as their home and themselves as British:

The Panthers Youth Movement motto, ‘Come what may we’re here to stay’, voiced a very different sense of residency and identity to that being voiced by their parents’ generation and signaled an important shift from an awareness of global liberation movements and revolutionary discourses to an engagement with local struggles. (Donnell, 2002, p. 14)

It is only after the mid-1980s when, in Hall’s words, the struggle to come into representation was superseded by the politics of representation (i.e. the question of how to represent), did “fractures” begin to be felt in the employment of the term “black British.” As Donnell puts it, “cultural forms began to reflect the need to articulate the multiple imbrications of identity” (2002, p. 14). Focusing on the titles of the anthologies published in Britain in the 1980s, Donnell indicates that

there . . . came more diverse representations of both blackness and writing. . . there was a conscious sense of the need to articulate difference, not just the difference that being

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a woman makes but also the difference of being Asian, or lesbian, or a poet. (2002, p. 14)

Yet, of the two terms – black and British – it is the former that has been predominantly problematized as a unifying category as is suggested by Hall’s naming the shift in black cultural politics in Britain as the “end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject” (1989/1996, p. 443). Focusing on this uneven contestation regarding the constituents of the term “black British,” Donnell raises a significant question: “certainly the success of the 1980s and 1990s in terms of creating a visible and talented body of writers has meant that black writing can now afford to represent itself in more diverse and risky ways” (2002, p. 15), but it seems that “for most people involved in these discussions it is the interpretation of the term black that remains fraught and problematic. Is ‘writing British’ less problematic? Is contesting the nation no longer an issue for black British writers?” (2002, p. 16).

By “contesting the nation” Donnell means the continuing need for struggling against hierarchical exclusions and positionings that nationalist discourses and practices construct both within the nation and between nations. “What does it mean,” she asks, “to claim an identity of Britishness when the state detains people without trial for up to 18 months, and when the media represent some of the poorest people on earth as always already suspect?” (2002, p. 18). Her question explores in general terms the relationship between “an identity of struggle” and a national identity when they are hyphenated; and, more specifically, how does, or, perhaps, should the term “black” inform “Britishness”?

It was not that long ago that black youths had a similar currency in the media and popular cultural imagination to that of refugees. Has the nation changed or has it just shifted its limits? Has the centre just got bigger and yet remained reliant on its margins for intersubjective identifications still intimately involved with race and ethnic difference? . . . It is perhaps now that the black is in the Union Jack that this contestation is more urgent than ever. (Donnell, 2002, p. 17)

Andrea Levy’s short story “Loose Change” not only marks a new dimension in her fiction, in which she contests the connection between Englishness and whiteness and emphasizes imperialism and slavery as constituents of present-day hierarchies in Britain, but it also contributes to the visibility of the figure of the refugee in

contemporary British fiction. In the remaining of this paper, first, an overview of Levy's novels whose stories are mainly and/or partly set in Britain will be made; and, then, "Loose Change," a short story in her most recent work, *Six Stories and an Essay*, will be discussed to foreground Levy's employment of the figure of the refugee as a new marker of the limits of tolerance and belonging in contemporary British society.

An Overview of Levy's Fiction: From the Domestic to the Global

In an interview conducted by Fischer, Levy states as follows: "I have a tremendous fear of being homeless. My biggest fear would be to be a refugee—absolutely terrifying. I grew up in this tiny little council flat, and it was a real dive, six of us in this tiny little place and we always dreamed of a home" (2005, p. 367). The "fear of being homeless" and the need for settling down in a place that "feels yours" inform all Levy's early novels. In *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) in a passage entitled "The Dream" the narrator, Angela, mentions their trip to the Ideal Home Exhibition as their "main family outing every year" (1994, p. 39). In the exhibition hall, the narrator states, "the place we all liked the best, the place we all agreed was the best, the reason we came, were the houses" (1994, p. 41). The council flat the family returns to at the end of the day, in contrast to spacious "bathrooms and sitting rooms, conservatories, bedrooms and studies, granny flats and garages" (1994, p. 41) which they marveled at in the exhibition, is "in need of decoration, in need of being ten times the size, in need of a staircase" (1994, pp. 41-2). Apart from size, what makes the houses in the exhibition further appealing to Angela and her family is the temporariness of living in a council flat, which is doubly unsettling due to the immigrant status of the parents. As Levy points out in the same interview, her characters' (and her own) need for home "must have to do with having immigrant parents and a palpable sense of insecurity of being in a society where the only security is being at home" (2005, p. 369). Perhaps, the most telling example of the entanglement in Levy's fiction of the need to settle down in a house and the national space appears in the narratorial summary provided early in the narrative in *Fruit of the Lemon*. Describing her parents' moving out of their council flat into a house of their own, Faith states: "And when Mildred and Wade closed the door of their house for the first time, they both hung their heads and

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shut their eyes in prayer. ‘We finally arrive home,’ they said” (1999, p.11).

Vivien, one of the two first-person sister narrators in *Never Far From Nowhere*, describes the difference in view when the family moves in a new third-floor council flat as follows:

After years spent in a damp basement, where we could see the bottoms of people’s legs as they went about their business on our busy road. Knees, ankles and feet in shoes all seen through railings – bars. But from our third-floor flat we could look down on people’s heads and sometimes, when they were in the not too far distance, we could see them all. (1996, p. 3)

While the barred window of the basement flat provides them with a very limited view of the life outside and adds on to their feelings of exclusion and marginalization, the new third-floor flat enables the family to “see them all,” which is indicative of these characters’ longing to be fully and equally connected to people outside; or to put it in a more general way, to the national community.

This characteristic informs Levy’s early novels at the level of narration, as well. These novels differ remarkably from Levy’s later novels (i.e. *Small Island* (2004) and *The Long Song* (2010)) in terms of the abundance of references to the shared culture of daily life in Britain, which suggests that these texts are directed to or aim to connect specifically with a group of audience for whom these references are equally meaningful. In her essay “This is My England” (2000) “I am English,” she holds. “Born and bred, as the saying goes. (As far as I can remember, it is born and bred not born-and-bred-with-a-very-long-line-of-white-ancestors-directly-descended-from-Anglo-Saxons)” (Levy, 2000, para. 29). Instead, she foregrounds the shared culture of daily life as the element that makes one feel connected to a national community. Levy’s early novels, therefore, can be identified as works of fiction presuming/implying a local/domestic audience (rather than a global one) since they are mainly concerned with showing to the English – white and black – that “the majority of English people are white, but some are not” (Levy, 2000, para. 32). In the light of Hall’s discussion of the black cultural politics in Britain, it can be held that Levy’s early novels participate in the moment whose defining characteristic Hall formulates as the struggle to come into representation. Levy’s determination to portray England as the home of her black British

characters, especially of those belonging to the second generation, informs these novels in terms of both subject matter and form.

Angela, the narrator in *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, asserts her difference from her parents, who are from the *Windrush* generation, as follows: "I knew this society better than my parents. My parents' strategy was to keep as quiet as possible in the hope that no one would know that they had sneaked into this country. They wanted to be no bother at all. But I had grown up in its English ways. I could confront it, rail against it, fight it, because it was mine – a birthright" (1994, p. 88). The narrators in both *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Never Far from Nowhere* show that they "know this society." The novels contain unexplained or imperfectly-explained references to figures of popular culture such as Jim Clarke and Jackie Stewart (1994, p. 13), Julie Andrews (1994, p. 13) and Val Doonican (1994, p. 18); there are also references to products commonly used in Britain such as "Oxo gravy" (1994, p. 44), "Morgan's Pomade" (1994, p. 85) "Brylcream" (1994, p. 85) and "Mojo Chews" (1994, p. 101); toys and children's games such as "Scalextric's track" (1994, p. 135), "rounders, peep-behind-the-curtain, tin tan tommy" (1994, p. 54); stores and fashion boutiques like "Chelsea Girl on Halloway Road" (1996, p. 30), "Woolworths" (1996, p. 71); nightclubs like "Whisky-a-Gogo" and "Birdland" (1996, p. 30); national newspapers and magazines such as *The Evening Standard* (1996, p. 73), *Fab 208* (1996, p. 44) and *Jackie* (1996, p. 44); and an abundance of references to national television shows, some of which are *Dixon of Dock Green* (1994, p. 18), *The Big Match* (1994, p. 31), *The Golden Shot* (1994, p. 31), *Ready, Steady, Go* (1994, p. 34), *Coronation Street* (1994, p. 135), *On the Buses* (1996, p. 5), *Noddy and Big Ears* (1996, p. 39), and *Old Grey Whistle Test* (1996, p. 200). These references delimit the novels' audience since they are deeply anchored in a national context.

Another function of these frequent references in these texts to nationally-popular television shows is that they foreground the connection of the black characters to the national community. The role of the experience of watching TV in the imagining of a community becomes more explicit if what Benedict Anderson theorizes about newspaper-reading in *Imagined Communities* is applied to TV-watching in Levy's fiction. Anderson argues as follows:

We know that particular morning and evening editions will overwhelmingly be consumed between this hour and that, only

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on this day, not that. . . . The significance of this mass ceremony . . . is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. . . . [F]iction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. (1983, pp. 35-36)

Watching TV is another equally efficient “ceremony” which creates that “confident” awareness of occupying time simultaneously with millions of others. So, Levy’s representation in these novels of black British characters in rooms filled with sounds and sights from nationally-popular TV shows in Britain emerges as a means in her fiction of demonstrating their participation in the imagining of a community outside their tiny flats. To exemplify her statement that “England is the only society I truly know and sometimes understand” (Levy, 2000, para. 29), Levy mentions again the experience of watching TV in “This is My England”: “When I hear that the surge of energy needed after a good television programme is because everyone is getting up to make a cup of tea, it makes me smile. I, too, was there with my teapot after the last episode of *Only Fools And Horses*” (Levy, 2000, para. 30).

Levy’s third novel, *Fruit of the Lemon* stands apart from the earlier novels with regard to inclusion of a section titled “Jamaica” in between two sections entitled “England.” The division of the narrative into two roughly-equal sections devoted first to “England” and then to “Jamaica” in *Fruit of the Lemon* marks this novel as a turning point with which Levy’s contestation of the nation gains another dimension. In her conversation with Fischer, Levy holds that “with *Fruit of the Lemon*, I started that backward look, when Faith [the narrator] goes into her family”:

Before I wasn’t so interested in the link between Jamaica, the Caribbean and Britain. I was much more, ‘we’re black British, we’re here, and how are we going to move on?’ And that’s absolutely part of what I do, too, but I didn’t think that looking backwards was so important, whereas now I think it is absolutely important and so fascinating. (1999, p. 362)

From *Fruit of the Lemon* onward, Levy's fiction begins to problematize the neat distinction between "here" and "there" to foreground the shared history and thereby the shared present of life "here" in Britain and "there" in the (former) colonies.

Faith's journey to Jamaica does not make her feel that she is from Jamaica. On the contrary, her connection to England as her "home" becomes more solid at the end of the novel: Referring to the stories she heard from her relatives in Jamaica, "they laid a past out in front of me," she says. "They wrapped me in a family history and swaddled me tight in its stories. And I was taking back that family to England. But it would not fit in a suitcase – I was smuggling it home" (1999, p. 326). As suggested by Levy's choice of words, Faith's exposure to her family history signifies the birth of a sense of membership in a community that emerges to be much larger than the one she has so far imagined. Her sense of "Englishness" and "home" becomes imbued with a postcolonial consciousness, or as Michael Perfect puts it, it gains a *contrapuntal* dimension (2010, p. 31).

Queenie, the white landlady in *Small Island* takes in immigrant tenants for economic reasons. This is the only way for her to sustain her house, which is symbolic of post-war Britain whose economy was in need of immigrant labor. Just like the portrayal in *Fruit of the Lemon* of "the slave quarters standing behind the slave-owner's house . . . [as] a symbolic reminder of the slavery and colonialism that built and supported Britain as the centre of an empire and a modern nation" (Gui, 2012, p. 86), *Small Island* represents immigration from the Caribbean in the post-war era as a means of substantial support to the national economy. Furthermore, Levy's novel draws a parallelism between post-war immigrants and immigrants from Eastern Europe who came to Britain during the war again through the image of Queenie's lodging house. As Corinne Duboin puts it,

History repeats itself: only the presence of outsiders, the occupancy of stigmatized German Jewish, Polish, Irish or Caribbean tenants have allowed . . . [women such as Queenie] to survive in hard times, thus suggesting Britain's recurrent economic dependence and capitalization on yet unwelcome immigrants. (2011, p. 24)

Small Island differs from Levy's earlier novels not only because it is set in early- and mid-twentieth century Britain, Jamaica and India, and narrated by four alternating narrators, two of whom

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are white English characters, Queenie and her husband Bernard Bligh. It is also different because the novel presumes an international addressee. Unlike Levy’s early “domestic” fiction characterized by references to the daily culture in Britain, *Small Island* contains hardly any such references. Furthermore, in contrast to the earlier novels, which “were much more lived” (Levy, 2005, p. 363), in this novel, during the writing of which Levy says she thought herself “entirely into somebody else’s existence” (2005, p. 363), there is an ironic distance between the implied author and three of the narrators in the novel – Queenie, Hortense and Bernard. The presumed audience of the novel is someone who can realize the distinction between these narrators’ provincial/insular thinking (which is in varying degrees and forms) and a postcolonial reading the novel calls for. Compared to her overtly racist husband, Bernard, Queenie is represented as a character who is much more open-minded about race; yet, she is also portrayed as an ignorant character especially in scenes such as the one where she “teaches” Hortense what a “shop” is. As for Hortense, she is, as Cynthia James holds, “set up to reveal her true identity as a naïve snob” (2010, p. 53). Despising her husband, Gilbert, whom she thinks no matter what he does “he talked (and walked) in a rough Jamaican way” (Levy, 2004, p. 449), she is determined “to speak in an English manner,” (2004, p. 449) and live in England, which she imagines is a place where “I walk to the shop where I am greeted with manners, ‘Good day,’ politeness, ‘A fine day today,’ and refinement, ‘I trust you are well?’” (2004, p. 101). Interestingly, Hortense’s use of English changes depending on her addressee. While she talks with Gilbert in “mesolectal West Indian Creole” (James, 2010, p. 54), she addresses the narratee in the same highly formal and archaic English that she uses in her conversations with English people whom she meets in London. As for Queenie and Bernard, they both address narratees who can be identified as their fellow white Englishmen and women: “These colored people don’t have the same standards,” says Bernard. “I’d seen it out east. Not used to our ways. . . I’ve nothing against them in their place. But their place isn’t here” (Levy, 2004, p. 469). The national community imagined and addressed by Bernard is exclusive of “these colored people.”

Of all the narrators it is Gilbert between whom and the implied author there is no ironic distance. And, interestingly, his narrative suggests that Gilbert’s audience is not limited to the English. Sometimes he groups himself together with a “we”

consisting of “Jamaican boys” (Levy, 2004, p. 25); yet, he does not seem to address solely this group because his narrative includes sections where he describes Jamaicans to an audience whom, he assumes, does not know as much as what he knows about them: “All we Jamaican boys know the sign,” he says. “When a man need to be alone with a woman, for reasons only imagination should know, the head is cocked just a little to one side while the eye first open wide then swivel fast to the nearest exit” (2004, p. 25). Yet, it seems that this group of audience, for whom things are clarified, is not only the English because, although in some parts he directly addresses the English – “let me ask the Mother Country just this one simple question: how come England did not know me?” (2004, p. 141) he says, for instance – he also talks about England and the English to an audience who may not be so familiar with them as much as he is: “Did you know that the smog in London can be so thick that it is not possible to recognize your own hand in front of your face?” he directly asks his audience, for example (2004, p. 133). When juxtaposed with other narrators whose ways of addressing their audience create the effect of an in-between communication between the members of a national community, Gilbert’s audience emerges more explicitly as a group that is much broader – an audience that is not rooted in a national context, which seems to correspond to the presumed addressee *Small Island* as a whole is directed to.

As Weihsin Gui holds, Levy’s fiction “offer[s] a sense of belonging without necessarily reinforcing the exclusiveness of national identity” (2012, p. 74). She contests “Englishness” both by expanding it and configuring it from a postcolonial perspective, and, thereby, participates, to put it in Paul Gilroy’s terms, in both “rooted” and “routed” engagements with the nation in black British fiction.

“Loose Change”: Encountering the Refugee

In her 2007 study on contemporary fictional portrayals of multicultural London, Laila Amine identifies two paradigms: on the one hand, there are stories of “the Anglophone ‘empire’ enjoying a rightful, if tumultuous, return to the *metropole*”; on the other hand, there are stories focusing on “the messier borderless world, and on people who come from every conceivable location” (2007, p. 72). Amine discusses Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* as an example of the former paradigm in that the novel, approaching nationalism in a Habermasian sense, emphasizes “the collective’s desire to be part of a community and this voluntary membership bonds Britain’s plural

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inhabitants” (2007, p. 72). However, in Stephen Frears’ film *Dirty Pretty Things*, which Amine sees as an example of the latter paradigm, we see “the life of migrants who do not share Samad’s stakes in domesticating . . . (London). In fact, the film’s two main protagonists, Turkish Şenay and Nigerian illegal immigrant Okwe do not settle in Britain, for their illegal status maintains them in a bricked up underground system” (2007, p. 73). According to Amine, it is the first paradigm that dominates the cultural arena in terms of the portrayals of multicultural Britain although

today, people living in large British cities increasingly come from countries whose histories do not necessarily intersect with Britain’s. Moreover, the clampdown on migration flows has entailed a surge in illegal immigration. These faces are generally absent from novels focusing on immigrants such as Smith’s novel. (2007, p. 73)

Levy’s short story “Loose Change” throws light on one such face by dealing with the ways in which a refugee woman is othered by a black British woman. This story of an unsettling encounter between these two women in present-day London is remarkable for the following reasons: first, it signals a new dimension in the ways in which Levy contests the nation in that her fiction, which, as discussed earlier, changes its trajectory from an insular understanding of the domestic to a more global and postcolonial one, comes now to explore the hold of “the regimes of power which operate to differentiate one group from another; to represent them as similar or different” (Brah, 1996, p. 180) on black British characters themselves. In addition, the text, participating in the second paradigm that Amine points out, does a significant cultural work of rendering visible the faces of immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, whose positioning in contemporary Britain brings to the fore the question of establishing a non-hierarchical relationship with the other that goes beyond “national identity as the primary vector through which people understand who they are” (Amine, 2007, p. 83).

“Loose Change” is narrated by an unnamed single-mother, who identifies herself as a Londoner. In need of some loose change to use the tampon machine in a lavatory at the National Portrait Gallery, she asks for help. Of all the people there, only a foreigner, a woman named Laylor from Uzbekistan, offers to lend her some of her coins. Thus acquainted, the two women walk together around the museum

and comment on the artwork. Their friendly conversation comes to an abrupt end, however, when the narrator realizes that Laylor is a homeless refugee. Although she considers, for a brief moment, letting her stay in her own apartment and seeking out help for her, she quickly goes up the stairs to the exit, leaving Laylor behind.

Initially, the short story contains no clue as to the narrator's Caribbean descent. It becomes clear only through a brief reference towards the end to her grandmother who "came to England from the Caribbean." It seems the narrator is a third-generation black British woman and the absence of references to blackness and a single passing reference to the Caribbean connection suggest that the narrator feels fully at home in Britain, or more specifically in London. The short story opens with the following remarks of the narrator, who confidently asserts: "I am not in the habit of making friends of strangers. I'm a Londoner. Not even little grey-haired old ladies passing comment on the weather can shame a response from me. I'm a Londoner - aloof sweats from my pores." Another prominent black British writer, Caryl Phillips, whose parents like those of Levy's belong to the *Windrush* generation, comments on this much more "comfortable" relationship of the third generation black British people with Britain as follows:

I think that members of the emerging third generation feel much more comfortable describing themselves as black Britons, which is something my generation always had some difficulty with because they didn't even want to deal with the term 'Briton.' At the same time, they couldn't really deal with the term 'West Indian' either. So I think that what will happen in this generation is that more barriers will be broken down. You see this when you turn on the TV set; you see black people on the TV and heading the news. They are doing things that they weren't doing ten years ago. I think people today feel a lot more comfortable describing themselves as British and black. Whereas, when I was a teenager, there was a real confusion with color and nationalism. I think that has straightened itself out slowly, thankfully. (1991, p. 599)

Levy's short story foregrounds the historically variable social positioning of black people in Britain, too. Laylor's account of the painful conditions of leaving her country and arrival to Britain

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reminds the narrator of her own grandmother’s bitter story of coming to Britain.

[Laylor] and her brother had had to leave their country, Uzbekistan, when their parents, who were journalists, were arrested. It was arranged very quickly - friends of their parents acquired passports for them and put them on to a plane. They had been in England for three days but they knew no one here. This country was just a safe place. . . . So they were sleeping rough - in the shelter of a square, covered in blankets, on top of some cardboard. (2014, p. 88)

The narrator’s grandmother, too, she remembers, “lived through days as lonely and cold as an open grave” when she first came to Britain from the Caribbean (2014, p. 89). She also knows that it is thanks to a “stranger who woke her [grandmother] while she was sleeping in a doorway and offered her a warm bed for the night” (2014, p. 90) that her grandmother was able to survive. Yet, the narrator’s awareness of this shared experience of homelessness does not lead her to help Laylor. She “pushed through the revolving doors (of the museum) and threw (herself) into the cold” (2014, pp. 91-92) leaving Laylor behind.

What is perhaps more unsettling in the short story is the narrator’s account of what her grandmother now thinks about the refugees in Britain: “Now my grandmother talks with passion about scrounging refugees,” she says “those asylum seekers who can't even speak the language, storming the country and making it difficult for her and everyone else” (2014, p. 90). The grandmother and the narrator are members of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain. The change in the grandmother’s position in relation to the British nation and present-day immigrants in the country illustrate well Avtar Brah’s argument that “forms of relationality” between “diasporic formations” are “historically variable” (1996, p. 180): once positioned as an outsider in the country, now, the grandmother differentiates herself from refugees and “those asylum seekers who can’t even speak the language, storming the country.” The grandmother’s participation in a discourse that constructs the newly-arrived immigrants in the country as the Other as well the narrator’s failure to show sympathy to Laylor show how influential “the regimes of power” are in constructing hierarchical relationships between social groups by “includ(ing) or exclud(ing) them from constructions of the nation and the body politic” (Brah, 1996, pp.

179-180) as well as the highly efficient functioning of media as an ideological apparatus in the production of the figure of the refugee in popular cultural imagination as someone “scrounging” and “storming” the country.

Ironically, the ways in which the narrator describes Laylor make her participate in colonialist discourses which drew a connection between the colonized and uncleanness.³ It is Laylor’s “dirt” that the narrator mentions over and over again to justify her unwillingness to help her: she sees “dirt under each of her chipped fingernails, the collar of her blouse crumpled and unironed, a tiny cut on her cheek, a fringe that looked to have been cut with blunt nail-clippers” (2014, p. 87). “My life was hard enough without this stranger tramping through it,” the narrator complains and adds:

She smelt of mildewed washing. Imagine her dragging that awful stink into my kitchen. Cupping her filthy hands round my bone china. Smearing my white linen. Her big face with its pantomime eyebrows leering over my son. Slumping on to my sofa and kicking off her muddy boots as she yanked me down into her particular hell. (2014, p. 89)

The passage seems to suggest that the narrator’s fear of her home’s intrusion by this “dirty” stranger is symbolic of the fear in contemporary British society of the refugee “scrounging” and “storming” the country as is voiced explicitly by the narrator’s grandmother.

Another writing choice on the part of Levy that demands attention is that Laylor is from Uzbekistan.

‘Where are you from?’ I asked.

‘Uzbekistan,’ she said.

Was that the Balkans? I wasn’t sure. ‘Where is that?’

She licked her finger, then with great concentration drew an outline on to the tabletop. ‘This is Uzbekistan,’ she said. She licked her finger again to carefully plop a wet dot on to the map saying, ‘And I come from here - Tashkent.’

‘And where is all this?’ I said, indicating the area around the little map with its slowly evaporating borders and town. She screwed up her face as if to say nowhere. (2014, p. 85)

³ See A. McClintock’s *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (1995).

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To put it in Amine’s words, Laylor is a character from a country “whose histor[y] do[es] not necessarily intersect with Britain’s” (2007, p.73). And, unlike immigrants from Britain’s former colonies, whose stories are abundant in multicultural fictional accounts of post-war and present day Britain, Laylor has no claim on the British national identity or on Britain as her home. She is “nobody” from “nowhere” and she is in need of help merely as a total stranger – a kind of help and recognition that goes beyond “national identity as the primary vector” (Amine, 2007, p. 83). In that respect, the grandmother’s remark about the refugees who “can’t even speak the language” might be a manifestation of the hierarchical distinction constructed between immigrants like her from the Caribbean or any other colonial location who can speak the English language and those like Laylor, for whom English is a foreign language.

Levy’s short story, “Loose Change,” brings to the fore what both the narrator and her grandmother fail to see. It draws attention to historically variable and relational limits of tolerance and belonging in narratives of nation and national identity and it invites the reader’s attention to contemporary representations of refugees, asylum seekers, and illegal immigrants in ways that are not unlike the representations of the colonized as well as black people in colonialist and racist discourses. Furthermore, the story suggests that the racist exclusionary rhetoric as well as practices that black British people have had to fight against can, or, perhaps, should function as a ground on which to consolidate a critical attitude to otherization of all sorts and expand the limits of tolerance and belonging. In fact, this seems to be the primary reason for Levy to tell us this story in that, as she puts it in “Introduction to *Loose Change*,” “growing up I was acutely aware of how any act of kindness can mean so much in a hostile land” (2014, p. 80).

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