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The Poet as Cultural Dentist: Ethnicity in the Poetry of Jackie Kay

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The acclaimed British poet Jackie Kay (*1961) belongs to the colourful mainstream of recent British poetry. The paper aims to survey the ethnic imagery and consciousness Kay explores in her poems, predominantly with the images of dentistry. Special attention will be paid to the images of cultural significance. A few sample poems will be discussed to demonstrate the constant search for identity (inclusion vs. exclusion, assimilation vs. marginalization) and cultural heritage.

Jackie Kay has been labelled as a British, Scottish, ethnic, lesbian, and diasporic writer. In spite of the ambiguity of her categorization, the paper aims to focus on the ethnic aspect of Kay's poetry. In her first collection *The Adoption Papers* (1991) Jackie Kay uses three speakers – birth mother, adoptive mother and the adopted child—and examines how their identity is being formed. Kay understands identity as constantly and flexibly changing. David Paddy explains it in terms of process: “[In Kay's poems] identity is regarded as a process of choices characters make about themselves, usually in reaction to the ideas and perceptions of others.” In Kay's view, identity is not given to the child at birth but is acquired through interaction with the child's environment: “All this umbilical knot business is nonsense” (Kay 1991: “The Telling Part”, line 65). The act of adoption is not the primary focus, but it serves as a matrix for the metaphorical discovery of the self. In *The Adoption Papers*, Kay is also sensitive to cultural and racial elements:

My skin is hot as burning coal
like that time she said Darkies are like coal
in front of the whole class—my blood
what does she mean? ... (Kay 1991: “Black Bottom”, lines 57-60)

Both identity and race are social categories. In the words of Paddy, “Even as race and racism are shown to have real effects, the poem shows race to be a matter of social perception not skin and biology.”

The speakers in the poetry of Kay are exclusively individuals because she does not want to advocate the collective consciousness of the black community in Britain which is at present very diverse. As Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy have shown, the burden of representation that rested upon ethnic writers in the 1970s was lifted, and in the 1980s and 1990s there was a “diminishing need to speak for a singular, coherent, ‘representative’ community” (Procter 2000: 194-195). In this context, Kay’s second collection *Other Lovers* (1993) and especially her third collection *Off Colour* (1998) explore social and racial issues with the help of dentistry imagery. The poem “Crown and Country” shows that the condition of one’s teeth is symptomatic of one’s social status.

When you come to our country
you will realise we are big on dentistry:
[...] our people
[...] all know dentures are more crucial
than culture. [...]
We identify people by their bite.
The lower class have most unusual bites.
They are sick to the back teeth. (Kay 1998: “Crown and Country”, lines 1-2, 6-8, 13-15)

The British consider the health of the teeth important as it either includes or excludes an individual from the particular social class. Ironically, the white British in Kay’s poems have to resort to false teeth whereas the black people seem to enjoy perfect teeth. The dentures of the whites substitute the real teeth and, according to the poet, are as false as their artificial smiles:

We do not talk much, we say
cheese; pints of creamy gleaming teeth,
pouring out our white grins, our gold caps; smirks. (Kay 1998: “Crown and Country”, lines 8-10)

The hypocrisy of the society and the devaluation of the culture is further signified by the fact that the white dentists seek in their practice only their own profit.

Our dentists are the richest in the world,
mining our gobs of gold. They love the old;
the ones who finally succumb to receding gums,
to teeth falling haplessly out like hailstones. (Kay 1998: “Crown and Country”, lines 19-22)

Contrasted with the teeth of the white people are the teeth of blacks. The poem entitled “Teeth” exemplifies this contrast amply. The poet uses three characters: a young lady, her mother, and a white officer. The name of the young lady is not mentioned, she is referred to as X. The reader learns in the course of the poem that the lady is an illegal immigrant, and therefore is by the officers treated not as a human being but purely as an anonymous file number. In sharp contrast to the cold detachment of the officer is the innocence of the lady which is symbolized by her teeth. She “came to this country with her own teeth. / [She] has all

her own teeth. /.../ Look into her mouth. She still has them./ Perfect pearls. Milk stones. Pure ivory” (Kay 1998: “Teeth”, lines 36; 1;3-4). Her teeth are her true treasure which the white people envy. Kay recurrently compares the teeth of the black people to ivory – the valuable merchandise of the colonial past of the black continent. At the same time, the image of teeth being ivory relates the speaker to her African cultural heritage. The image of teeth – the perfect pearls – the natural jewel, has the quality of a cultural icon. However, the mother of the lady uses her teeth not as jewel but as a means of protection and even as a metaphorical weapon. Unlike her daughter, she wears

... false teeth. Tusks,
badly fitted, [which] left something unsaid
— a tiny gap between tooth and gum.
Her mum’s teeth, in a glass tumbler, swam
at night: a shark’s grin; a wolf’s slow smirk. (Kay 1998: “Teeth”, lines 8-12)

Kay utilizes the teeth of the mother to give her the metaphorical role of a shark or a wolf that fights to protect those of her kin. The white officer arrests and humiliates the young lady by taping her mouth and therefore hiding her “lively /smile” (Kay 1998: “Teeth”, lines 6-7). The lively smile is an attribute that makes her look innocent. The officer overpowers her only when he silences her by killing her. Bruce King argues “Someone with good teeth is rejected, treated as an alien, and subjected to violence” (1994: 580). Kay contrasts the two characters in the following way: whereas the lady is innocent, the officer is a liar which is shown by his unhealthy teeth:

Lies will roll
tomorrow. The man with the abscess
will say she had a weak heart. (Kay 1998: “Teeth”, lines 37-38)

The image of the teeth acquires another significance in the poem entitled “Black Chair”. The main character of this poem uses her teeth to find a lover: “every cavity [is] an excuse for meeting” (line 29). The patient in the chair at the dentist’s falls into a dream in which the doctor transforms into a lover. Yet, her dream does not materialize and her teeth only initiate her search for a new identity:

I’ll look at my own teeth on the white screen
They tell me nothing about my self.
My teeth, speechless.
Rootless pearls, anonymous white things.
I need you to tell me about myself. (Kay 1998: “Black Chair”, lines 41-45)

Although the teeth are rootless pearls, they change from the anonymous white things into signifiers of the self only when considered as a means of communication. The teeth should initiate the dentist to explore the qualities of the person who possesses them. In return the black person will speak as well, in particular she will use “the language of ivory” (Kay 1998: “Black Chair”, line 7). Such a language clearly refers to the black cultural heritage and to the black continent. In addition, it displays awareness of the individual’s ethnic roots.

A similar image of teeth, supported by the typical African facial physiognomy, is explored in the poem “Pride” which concludes the collection *The Adoption Papers*. Identity is visible on the face, which betrays not only the colour of skin but which is also the hallmark for inclusion in or exclusion from a particular social group. At the same time, the face

functions as a shorthand for cultural identity. The poem “Pride” depicts two strangers who meet on the train in England and realize immediately from their anthropological features that they share the same ethnic background: “the stranger and I looking at each other / a look that was like something being given / from one to the other” (Kay 1998: “Pride”, lines 8-10). The moment of journey plays an important role as well. There is not only the physical movement of the train but during the journey they in their minds travel back to Africa, to their tribe of Ibo:

The night train boasted and whistled
through the English countryside,
There was a moment when
my whole face changed into a map,
and the stranger on the train
located even the name
of my village in Nigeria
in the lower part of my jaw. (Kay 1998: “Pride”, lines 22-23,34-39)

Physical affinity gives the two strangers a sense of belonging. Kay engages once again the image of the teeth:

Those teeth are Ibo teeth,’ the stranger said,
that Ibo teeth are perfect pearls.
I smiled my newly acquired Ibo smile,
flashed my gleaming Ibo teeth.
‘Faults? No faults. Not a single one.’ (Kay 1998: “Pride”, lines 26,30, 66-67,69)

Kay keeps clear-cut the distinction between white and black. In the poem “Pride”, the exploration of identity that is based on the imagery of teeth, leads to concern with nationality. Kay is proud of her mixed Scottish and Nigerian background. She links her African descent to her Scottish nationality as she compares Scottish clans to African tribes – both sharing the pride of their respective cultures:

His [the stranger’s] face had a look
I’ve seen on a MacLachlan, a MacDonnell, a MacLeod,
the most startling thing, pride. (Kay 1998: “Pride”, lines 51-53)

However, Kay does not see the identity of the characters as either black or white. She has stated in an interview: “I consider myself a Scottish writer, in the sense that I am, and I consider myself a black writer, in the sense that I am, and a woman writer, in the sense that I am” (Severin 2002).

To sum up, Jackie Kay in her poetry proves that identity is complex and defies simple definition. David Paddy notes that “[Kay] attempts to show again and again in her work that identity is always at a crossroads of nation, race, gender, sexuality, and class, and that no person bears the privilege of being more pure than anyone else. Moreover, Kay’s characters do not suffer from identity crises for being Black and Scottish, adopted, or transgendered.” Images taken from the lexical field of dentistry exemplify the cultural and therefore ethnic awareness of the British society. The teeth become symbols of either cultural inclusion or exclusion, of assimilation or marginalisation. Whereas the white pride themselves with false teeth, dentures, the blacks usually possess perfect pearls of natural origin. Kay uses the image of teeth as a symbol that distinguishes the blacks from the white British. Reflecting the

meanings of the image of teeth, Jackie Kay discovers the constantly changing identity of an individual coming from a culturally and racially mixed background.

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