Hidden Lives on the NHS Frontline: Reading Healthcare Workers through Gender and Race in Black and Asian British Women's Writing

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Abstract
The high number of casualties among ethnic minority medics and nurses in the UK as a result of the Covid-19 virus has highlighted the vulnerability of minority ethnic healthcare workers in the country and raised public awareness of their largely ignored presence within key British institutions "that so often define Britishness, not least the NHS" (Hirsch 2020). This article examines the figure of the female healthcare worker in a selection of writings by black and Asian British women writers, and argues that literary works pose a challenge to the enduring invisibility of minority healthcare workers in the social fabric of the UK. Writing at the intersection of race, gender and class, writers such as Maeve Clarke, Bernardine Evaristo, Jackie Kay, Winsome Pinnock and Meera Syal have endevoured to fill the gaps of history and reclaim the vital social role black and Asian female nurses and hospital staff have played in both imperial and post-imperial Britain, in the face of social exclusion and constant confrontations with "everyday racism" (Essed 1991: 3)

Key-words: black British women writers, Asian British women writers, female healthcare workers, NHS, post-imperial Britain.

1. Introduction

The global spread of Covid-19 has laid bare social inequalities and exposed pervasive forms of precarity which are bound to increase the already existing "great divide" (Stiglitz 2015) between rich and poor, high- and low-income countries, the haves and have-nots. As Slavoj Žižek has argued, the pandemic has made specific sections of the working class more visible: nurses and hospital staff – often identifiable in terms of gender and race – have always existed, but the crisis has heightened people's awareness across the world of their status as the most exploited and vulnerable of workers (2020: 95-96).

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Žižek's specific mention of issues of gender and race in highlighting the plight of hospital workers echoes Judith Butler's long-standing engagement with and indictment of precarity. In *Frames of War* Butler defines precarity as a condition that cuts "across identity categories as well as multicultural maps", whereby certain groups are more vulnerable than others due to structural inequalities and a lack of support within the nation-state (2009: 25).

The insights provided by Žižek and Butler resonate strongly with the context of the UK in the early phase of the Covid-19 crisis: as the country was bracing for the huge impact of the pandemic and people were clapping or raising funds for hospitals and the NHS, statistics started to be released showing the extent to which black, Asian and minority ethnic people were in greater danger of being infected by the coronavirus and dying from it than white people. These statistics have exposed the faultlines within society, welding vulnerability with ethnicity, and have brought into the open a racialised sense of the nation that is rooted in its colonial and post-colonial history[1]. The high number of casualties among BAME medics and nurses is further proof of the ways in which minority ethnic healthcare workers are at a higher risk, since they are placed at the frontline of emergency and intensive care units. The crisis seems, therefore, to have exacerbated existing racial inequalities, both in the workplace and in society at large. Studies proposing measures which could increase safety in the workplace have provided evidence on the extent to which health workers of a minority background have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, while also highlighting the systemic racism present in the health services and demanding a timely recognition of the largely ignored role played by black, Asian and minority ethnic workers (Marsh and McIntyre 2020). The pandemic has invited comparison with earlier crises which have affected the country, particularly in the aftermath of World War II, a period in which Britain relied heavily

[1] An informative document issued by Public Health England on the impact of Covid-19 on BAME communities providing a list of recommendations is available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/Covid-19-understanding-the-impact-on-bame-communities, last accessed 18 September 2020; for statistics on healthcare workers see https://www.gmjournal.co.uk/bame-healthcare-workers-and-Covid-19, last accessed 18 September 2020.

on the presence of former colonial citizens in its workforce. Placing the current crisis and its effect on people of colour within a broader framework, Afua Hirsch has claimed that the contribution made by ethnic minorities, both during and after the war, was "erased", despite the fact that "black and Asian people in Britain underpinned the creation of the institutions that so often define Britishness, not least the NHS" (Hirsch 2020).

This article argues that a challenge to the enduring invisibility of minority healthcare workers in the social fabric of the UK can be found in the works of black and Asian British women writers, whose identities are rooted in multiple diasporic histories and the long legacy of empire. Writing at the intersection of race, gender and class, black and Asian women writers have mapped a diverse, multicultural Britain; their shared project of retrieving silenced histories of women of colour has involved filling the gaps of history and reclaiming the fundamental role played by black and Asian female nurses and hospital staff in a changing postwar Britain. Cutting across various genres, such as drama, the novel and semi-autobiographical short fiction, the works discussed in this article show the ways in which health workers are subject to relentless "everyday racism" (Essed 1991: 3) which operates largely through "routine and taken-for-granted practices and procedures in everyday life" (Essed 2001). Mirroring real-life experiences, fictional characters suffer discrimination that is likely to remain unobserved and unchallenged, while enduring micro-aggressions as opposed to overt acts of violence that in the long run can provoke "chronic adverse effects on [their] mental and physical health" (Essed 2001).

2. Exploding the Windrush myth: Caribbean nurses in postwar England

"The NHS was established within a month of the Windrush generation arriving in the UK in 1948. Caribbean nurses in particular played a vital role from the earliest days"[2]. This statement from the National Caribbean Heritage Museum stresses the concurrence

[2] https://www.museumand.org/2018/07/11/caribbean-nurses-the-backbone-of-the-nhs/#, last accessed 8 September 2020.

of the founding of the National Health Service with the arrival of the Windrush, the ship that has subsequently risen to become a forceful symbol of postwar West Indian migration to the UK. Recruitment of health workers had already started in the 1930s and increased significantly with the creation of the NHS, leading to "mass recruitment of waves of nurses from the African Caribbean in the 1950s and doctors from the Indian subcontinent in the 1960s"[3]. Hence, a suitable starting point for this analysis of female health workers as fictional characters is provided by the work of second-generation writers, who have sought to retrieve the lives and experiences of the "Windrush generation", often delving into their family histories. Narratives of the Windrush have tended to privilege a "patriarchal model of travel" (Mead 2009: 141) that foregrounds the experiences of male migrants, while significantly erasing the presence of women journeying to Britain. In 1998, during the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the Windrush, several creative works were commissioned in order to pay tribute to an entire generation of colonial migrants: the short story "Out of Hand" by Jackie Kay is one such work and aims to redress the gender balance in the memorialisation of the Windrush, by introducing "a woman's perspective into an historical narrative with a strong male bias" (Lowe 2018: 542).

In the story, Kay, who is of Scottish-Nigerian descent and is the national poet laureate of Scotland, focuses on Rose McGuire Roberts, who stepped off "the Windrush with her good hands, her dab hands, her handy hands" (Kay 1998: 97), a reiteraition that encapsulates Rose's willingness to contribute to postwar reconstruction as a working woman. Like many of her fellow travellers, Rose surrenders to the false promise of the "Mother Country", which soon confronts her with racism and neglect. As a woman in her seventies, Rose revisits the fifty years spent in England through a self-reflexive act of remembering: "the more she dwells, the better she feels" (p. 103). Remembering has a therapeutic effect on her, as it progressively unveils her traumatic experiences. Trauma hinges on the rift between dream and reality, as Rose recalls

[3] http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/immigration-and-the-national-health-service-putting-history-to-the-forefron, last accessed 8 September 2020.

how her willing hands expected to find employment as "a skilled nurse. Highly qualified" (p. 100), but despite her experience and qualifications, she is put on night-shift at Westminster Hospital. She is kept on night-shift for two years, even though she keeps trying to be taken off it, but "[t]he night hangs to her back; she can't escape it" (p. 100). Rose subscribes to the working ethos of the newly arrived colonial immigrants, putting up with the long shifts and the anti-social hours – "she never minded hard work" (p. 100) – but nonetheless becomes increasingly uneasy as more details are added to her working circumstances that spin a harrowing tale of discrimination endured in silence:

> she's been landed all the rubbish jobs, all the jobs she shouldn't be doing. Making tea, emptying rubbish, turning the patients in the night from left side to right on her own, cleaning the bed pans. Somehow, she ends up with all the bed-pans to empty. Now how did that happen.' Is she imagining the smile on the other nurses' faces? Is she imagining that sly satisfied look? […] All the bed pans in the world for her. Her willing hands. Emptying the steelpans with the terrible crunched bits of tissue in them and the strong smelling stools of the very ill. (pp. 100-01)

What Rose suffers offers a glimpse of the racialised pecking order in the hospital wards, which progresses in a crescendo of horror when she recalls being verbally abused by the patients without anyone helping her:

> Once a woman shouts at her. "You there! It's all your fault. You've brought your strange diseases with you! None of us would be in here if it weren't for you." […] Nobody tries to shut the woman up, so she continues. "Practising your strange ways here, your black magic!" she screams. The next one, if she remembers right, was a man with a pinched face and a sharp irritable nose. Just as she was turning him over, he whispered hoarsely in her ear, go back to the jungle. (pp. 101-02)

As Lowe has suggested, "racist slurs are typical of this post-war era" (2018: 548) and exacerbate Rose's trauma, which affects both her working and private life, as she carries the sound of the man's "fierce whisper all the way home" (Kay 1998: 102). On the whole, the unsavoury details that Kay gradually adds to Rose's story disrupt the celebratory mood of the Windrush anniversary that occasioned this work, and force readers to take in the material circumstances

of those who arrived from Jamaica and other colonies in and about 1948, to contribute to post-war reconstruction.

A Jamaican nurse is also at the centre of the semi-autobiographical short story "Letters a Yard", published in 2001 in the wake of the 50th anniversary of the Windrush, and as part of those works heralding the New Millennium and its multicultural make-up. The author of the story, Maeve Clarke, a Birmingham-based writer of Jamaican origins, adopts the epistolary form to offer a brief, yet insightful account of the life of Munchie Samuels, a Jamaican woman who settles in Birmigham with her husband Nico in 1960. Even though the couple's initial plan is only to stay in the country for five years, the family's dire economic circumstances and the arrival of children keep delaying their return home. In the letters written home ('a yard') to her mother, Munchie tries to tone down the harshness of adjusting to their new life in Birmingham, by offering a sanitised version of their daily struggles to find lodgings and work and the difficulties they face in making ends meet, while a counter-narrative of fragments of conversations between Munchie and Nico intersects the sequence of letters and voices the couple's frustrations. Nico, a trained accountant, can only find employment as a bus conductor, while Munchie, despite being a qualified nurse, only manages to get an auxiliary nursing job and is "lucky to get it" (Clarke 2001: 15), much to her husband's resentment: "You is a nurse. How come them give you this job, a wipe shit?" (p. 16).

The prevailing narrative mode is one of light humour, so as to mitigate the sense of loss, and defuse the overall bleak chronicling of their lives – in line with the objective pursued by black women writers of creating female characters that show resiliance and resist any victimisation. Instances of casual, everyday racism include Nico and Munchie being reprimanded by Reverend Templar in their local Baptist church for attending the services too often and singing too loud (p. 16), a tense interaction that is resumed towards the end of the story and offers Munchie, several years on, a chance to answer back: the hospital ward becomes a site for enacting resistance when Munchie is asked to fetch a bedpan for Reverend Templar, an old man now and a manifest racist, who "nuh want no black nurse or doctor touch him. Even insist them write it on him chart" (p. 28). Munchie takes her revenge by leaving the bedpan at the foot of his bed "where him can see it but cyah reach it" (p. 29).

By providing insights into discrimination in the workplace, in daily interactions and in the community at large, "Letters a Yard" shows how racism operates at multiple levels – individual, social and institutional. An instance of the latter is the experience of health personnel, as well as of other professionals trained in the West Indies, whose qualifications were not recognised, an aspect of the colonials' lives in the UK which has also resonated in creative works[4]. The gendered perspective of Clarke's story brings into focus how for women, who were burdened with managing the household and with the care of their children, it was virtually impossible to consider retraining, and consequently advance themselves professionally. Despite her project, laid out at the start of her narrative, to retrain as a nurse in England because "Jamaican training not the same as English training" p. (15), Munchie remains an auxiliary all the twenty-nine years she stays in England.

3. Dramatising the hospital cleaner in black British women's plays

Attention has been paid by black and Asian women writers not only to nurses, but also to other working women in the health sector. In the play *Leave Taking* (1987), written by English-Jamaican playwright Winsome Pinnock, the main character is Enid Matthews, a Jamaican hospital cleaner in her forties who lives in North London and is the single mother of two teenage daughters, whom she wants to raise as "English girls" (Pinnock [1989] 2018: 29). The play marked Pinnock's debut as a playwright and is part of a sizeable body of dramatic works by black British women writers in the 1980s, a decade defined by intense experimentation in the realm of identity politics across literature and the arts. Black women's plays from this period tend to examine the effects of migration and history on women's lives, while often challenging archetypical images of black womanhood by drawing on the real-life experiences of black women in Britain.

[4] This is a recurring motif in black British writing and impacts the professional lives of several fictional characters. See, for instance, the character of Hortense Roberts in the acclaimed novel *Small Island* (2004) by Andra Levy: she is a highly qualified school teacher in Jamaica, but when she relocates in London in 1948 and seeks employment, she is ridiculed and her application for a teaching position is turned down on grounds of her valueless qualifications.

Since its debut, *Leave Taking* has acquired the status of a pioneering work in black British women drama, as it dramatises key themes in diasporic writing, such as cross-generational and family tensions, and elaborates on the uneasy relationship with traditional Caribbean culture by envisioning a problematic idea of home. *Leave Taking* reflected the author's own "confusion of identity" as an English-Jamaican woman (Pinnock 1999: 31), but, as she stressed in her introduction to the 2018 edition of the play, published after the play's revival at the Bush Theatre in London, she was inspired to choose precisely a hospital cleaner as the pivotal figure, because this was a character she had never seen as "the lead in a British play" (Pinnock 2018: 5).

Pinnock's play has been read as a compelling dramatisation of a woman's life, whose fragmented identity is the result of the diaspora experience, one where she is torn between two irreconcilable worlds, England and Jamaica (Marzette 2006). However, attention to Enid as a working woman and to the material conditions of her English life helps to shed light on her dislocation and on her fractured subjectivity, and offers a more profound understanding of the character's troubled psychology. Enid is burdened by the fatigue of working "two jobs, seven days a week" (Pinnock 2018: 34), and her working life lingers on in her private domain where she still wears her "work overalls […] cleaning, scrubbing at the floor" (p. 24). She is reprimanded by her daughters for "bowing and scraping at your beloved England" (p. 34), until a highly dramatic confrontation takes place, when she is forced by her daughter Del to recall an incident that reveals the reality of her working life and the extent of her everyday humiliations:

> Del: You're all dressed up and you look beautiful we're having fun. Then one of the nurses drinks too much and pukes all over the floor, remember that? And in front of everyone Matron tells you to clean it up. You put your overalls on over your beautiful dress: in front of everyone there, you get a mop and bucket and clean it up. Yes, England loves you, all right. (p. 34)

In her last, powerful monologue, Enid comes to reconsider her allegiance to England, as she reflects on her ghostly existence and finally acknowledges how her life has been impacted by a normative, quotidian, and persistent mistreatment: "nobody see you, nobody

hear you. You could work fifty years with people and they still don't know you name. […] All the time you screaming, you screaming inside but nobody come. You don't exist" (p. 72). Calling on the audience to witness her denunciation of years of invisibility and disregard, her final speech demands recognition and a collective response.

4. "The Yellow Doctress": Remembering Mary Seacole

Challenging invisibility has also entailed digging into the past and reclaiming the centrality of marginalised historical figures such as Mary Seacole, a nineteenth-century nurse of mixed Jamaican-Scottish parentage who travelled extensively and tended the wounded during the Crimean War. Seacole was given a fictional life in Bernardine Evaristo's *Soul Tourists* (2004), a novel that is emblematic of the writer's commitment to confronting amnesia in modern Europe and rewriting British history as a transnational and black history.

Evaristo is a writer of mixed English-Nigerian heritage and the first black woman writer to be awarded the Booker Prize in 2019; her project of retrieving the black presence in Europe is central to her fiction and works on multiple levels: in *Soul Tourists* Seacole is one of a gallery of historical figures of mixed-race lineage who come to haunt Stanley, the modern-day black British traveller in Europe at the centre of the novel, and remind him of his roots in a "polycultural" Europe (McLeod 2011: 176). Stanley, who encounters the ghost of Seacole while on his way to Istanbul, admits his ignorance of this historical figure, a reminder of how a lack of awareness of black history prevents contemporary black Britons from having access to legacy formation. In the chapter in which Seacole appears, Evaristo favours an intertextual strategy, and she has Seacole read excerpts from her autobiography *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (1857), excerpts which offer details of her eventful, transcultural life. From her mother, a doctress, Seacole had acquired "the science of herbs and midwifery that had been handed down by the slaves", which she later supplemented with the knowledge received from European doctors (Evaristo 2005: 223). Wishing to escape the constraints of slave society in Jamaica, after having assisted the English who had contracted yellow fever on the island,

she moved to Panama, where she tended cholera victims and came to be known as "The Yellow Doctress" (p. 225). Seacole dreams of offering her services in the Crimean War, and of following in the steps of Florence Nightingale who, unlike Seacole, has come down in history as the eminent Victorian nurse. In Seacole's recollection of her arrival in England, bitter reality intrudes on her dream:

> I set sail for England and made many applications to the War Office and nursing agencies but without success. I sought out Florence Nightingale's office, where I was interviewed by one of her staff [...] And I saw in her face the fact that, had there been a vacancy, I should not have been chosen to fill it. And one cold evening I stood in the twilight … did these ladies shrink from accepting my aid because my blood flowed beneath a somewhat duskier skin than theirs? (p. 226)

The trailblazing, quasi-mythical figure of "Mrs Mother Aunty Yellow Doctress Mary Jane Seacole" (p. 227), whose life and works have been overshadowed by those of her contemporary Florence Nightingale, becomes in Evaristo's novel a model of resilience and dedication to the nursing profession. Her story, set against a backdrop of wars and health crises, in which she constantly faces rejections, foreshadows those of the fictional nurses in post-imperial Britain placed at the centre of the other works discussed in this essay, as well as the real difficulties faced by BAME health workers in Britain since the war.

5. The NHS and the South Asian midwife in the 1960s

A more recent exploration of black and Asian female health workers is the dramatic work *Rivers*, which the Old Vic theatre in London commissioned British-Asian actress and writer Meera Syal to write in 2018, as part of a series of monologues marking the 70th anniversary of the founding of the NHS. Many of the monologues in the series highlight the role of immigrants within the National Health Service[5]. In her piece Syal pays tribute to the largely overlooked role played

[5] The series, curated by playwright Lolita Chakrabrty and directed by actor and director Adrian Lester, comprises nine monologues, each covering a decade from the 1940s to the 2020s. The series is available at https://www.oldvictheatre.com/whats-on/2020/your-old-vic/the-greatest-wealth, last accessed 25 September 2020.

by South Asian female staff in sustaining the NHS, "the jewel in the crown" (Syal 2018). Syal has been at the forefront of the British-Asian cultural scene for over thirty years as both a writer and an actress; her work across various genres and media has exposed traditional views and cultural stereotypes of the Asians in Britain, while dealing with key issues, such as the performance of a gendered and ethnic identity, and the recovery of silenced female stories (Buonanno 2012). The solo performance allows Syal to reconcile both her writing and acting personas, and effectively combine humour and drama. The monologue is set against the background of the Conservative MP Enoch Powell's incendiary 'Rivers of Blood' speech, which he delivered in Birmingham in April 1968, and in which he foresaw racial violence and envisioned blood flowing in the Thames, drumming up anti-immigrant feelings[6].

Syal plays an Indian midwife in her fraught daily interactions with the abusive, racist English women whose babies she helps to deliver in a hospital ward in Birmingham, just weeks after Powell has delivered his infamous speech. Syal writes back to Powell's battle cry to stop immigration and call for a system of assisted repatriation, by highlighting the hypocrisy at work in his conflicting stance on Commonwealth immigration: the Indian midwife first came to England in 1963 in response to the invitation that Powell, as Health Minister, made ("no, not to me, personally") to colonial doctors and nurses to come and work in the UK. As the midwife quips: "it is funny he didn't mention it was his idea in the first place…" (Syal 2018).

Rivers critically assesses the postwar immigration of black and Asian nurses, endeavouring to decolonise the history of the NHS, while at the same time exposing the contradictory patterns that have been at work in Britain, epitomised in the 1960s by the figure of Powell. The NHS has steadily recruited staff from overseas, despite the attempts on the part of succeeding Governments to curb immigration, in response to mounting public concern about immigrants. Syal evokes a varied community of Commonwealth staff, with nurses from the Caribbean and Sri Lanka and Sikh doctors. They are all deeply resented by the white, ignorant women

[6] The full text of Powell's speech is available at https://www.enochpowell.net/fr-79.html, last accessed 26 September 2020.

in labour who, in between their "abusive ranting" demand "an English midwife, from England", but: "no, Miss Povey, you don't get to choose the colour of your midwife" (Syal 2018). In *Rivers* the drama unfolds around the uneasy physical proximity between the white women and the brown midwife who assists them; their cross-cultural encounter in the delivery ward is mediated through a series of bodily fluids that signal the ways in which the symbolism around 'rivers' is gradually woven into the piece, thus working as a powerful leitmotif: the enema collected after a woman has just given birth, the phlegm dripping down the midwife's face after she has been spat at, the content of a bedpan she has skilfully learnt to dodge, until a dramatic climax is reached when the midwife is tragically confronted with rivers of blood, in the form of post-partum haemorrhage which she frantically tries to stop: it is the midwife's "brown fist in the pink insides" of the English woman "that can stop the life blood throwing out of her" (Syal 2018).

Powell's evocation of violent confrontation between the English and the immigrants looms large in the final part of the monologue of the midwife, who speaks back to him through her resolve to save the life of the racist Miss Povey, because every life matters – "even yours, Ms Povey" – and through her conviction that this is the "only antidote to hatred, and what makes us human after all" (Syal 2018). Her final words resound powerfully as a direct indictment of Powell's hideous speech that had been "infecting frightened people with microbes of bigotry and hatred, fanning the virus into an epidemic, so the only possible solution was to surround the foreign body and cut it out" (Syal 2018).

6. Conclusion

In a recent piece written in the midst of the pandemic, Arundhati Roy offers a compelling perspective on the current global crisis. She argues:

> Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to "normality", trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. […] Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

> We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, […] we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy 2020)

In her elegant prose Roy warns against a return to normality and suggests that walking through the gateway, "with little luggage", can ultimately help to dismiss the jingoistic ignorance of the past and imagine another world, one that forces us to recognise the vulnerability and precarity of frontline workers, particularly those who are affected by discrimination on the grounds of their race and gender.

Over several decades, black and Asian women writers have illuminated the lives of minority ethnic workers in health sectors and teased out the connection between contemporary forms of vulnerability, the long legacy of the empire and the emergence of post-imperial Britain. These powerful narratives seem even more timely now that the pandemic has opened a window onto troubled contact zones, such as hospital wards and emergency units. The ongoing confrontation with "the virus of hatred" (Syal 2018) felt towards fictional healthcare workers, functions as a reminder of the role that literature can play in times of crisis and of its power to expose granular levels of crisis. As they give shape to marginalised, black and Asian working-class women in the fragile context of the healthcare sector, the works discussed in this article illustrate aspects of collective British history from a marked gendered perspective that favours legacy formation. They expand and ultimately rethink the cultural imaginary of the nation, thus helping to shed "the carcasses of prejudice and hatred" (Roy 2020) and hopefully gesture towards a fairer society.

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