

# Racial Attitude and Discrimination in Andrea Levy's Small Island

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**Siddiqua Parveen**

*Research Supervisor*

**Aysha Siddiqua. F**

*Research Scholar, PG Department of English  
M.M.E.S Women's Arts and Science College*

### Abstract

*This paper examines the systemic bias experienced by Jamaican immigrants in Britain, with a focus on racial attitudes and discrimination. It shows how these beliefs influenced social and economic marginalization by making analogies to colonial hierarchies. In order to promote inclusivity, the chapter highlights the significance of identifying and resolving these differences from a multicultural perspective.*

**Keywords:** Racism, Prejudice, Discrimination, Segregation, Bias, Bigotry, Immigration and Multiculturalism.

In *Small Island* by Andrea Levy, racial attitudes are a central theme, explored through the experiences of Jamaican immigrants Hortense and Gilbert Joseph as they navigate post-World War II Britain. The novel highlights the pervasive racism they face, from societal prejudice to systemic discrimination. Despite their contributions during the war, they are met with hostility and rejection in a country they had idealized as the "Mother Country."

The story also delves into the racial dynamics of colonial Jamaica, where lighter skin is associated with privilege and higher status, reflecting the lingering effects of colonialism. Hortense's upbringing exemplifies this, as her lighter complexion affords her certain opportunities, though these are still limited by the overarching racial hierarchy.

In Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, multicultural theory can be applied to understand the experiences of the characters as they navigate the complexities of identity and belonging in post-war Britain. The Jamaican characters, Gilbert and Hortense, embody the struggles of immigrants who must reconcile their cultural heritage with the realities of a society that marginalizes them. Their interactions with English culture reveal the tensions between preserving their identity and adapting to a new environment, a central concern of multiculturalism.

Queenie, a white Englishwoman, represents a more progressive perspective within the narrative. Her willingness to engage with and support the Jamaican characters challenges the rigid racial and cultural boundaries of the time. Through her, Levy explores the potential for empathy and mutual understanding in a multicultural society.

The novel *Small Island* explores the phenomenon of racial prejudice exhibited by white persons in contemporary British society. As a result of this racial discrimination, Black individuals experience harsh treatment from white individuals in Britain. *Small Island* is not exceptional in this aspect. White people capitalise on the perceived subordinate status of black individuals in modern society. The narrative commences with a prologue spoken by Queenie, setting the tone for the tale. Queenie expresses her racial feelings towards a black woman during her visit to the African hut.

This work often explores racism in Britain. The white man's animosity for Hortense is evident in the text. She observed the initial signs of bias upon her arrival in England. She attempts to obtain the address for Nevern Street and a vehicle from a Caucasian man. Despite her numerous efforts to articulate the address, the white British man is incapable of understanding her. Upon glancing at her, the Caucasian man seems bewildered. She provides the address to the driver repeatedly.

She is highly cognisant of her Jamaican origin. She articulates her reflections on her racial heritage, recognizing her familial lineage. In this situation, she underscores her affiliation with her father rather than her mother. She observes that her skin matches her father's, characterizing it as "light." Furthermore, she juxtaposes her skin tone with that of her mother, describing it as "bitter chocolate." This demonstrates her acute sense of race and complexion. She views her lighter complexion as a manifestation of her father, rather than her mother. Consequently, she views her lighter complexion as an opportunity for a "golden life."

It highlights the discrimination encountered by individuals of colour in public spaces, including movies. During their visit to the theatre to view a film, Gilbert encounters discriminatory conduct from the usherette, alongside Queenie and Arthur Bligh, Queenie's father-in-law. Astounded, he discovers that the usherette directs him to occupy the rear row reserved only for black folks, despite the presence of unoccupied seats. She asserts that it contravenes the theater's regulations for individuals of color to use those seats.

Gilbert swiftly recognises that England possesses a profoundly entrenched racist society. He possesses an almost surreal conviction in an idealised representation of Britain, and the veneration of this picture renders the stark truth even more jarring. He depicts this beloved Mother as a "filthy tramp," ragged, old, and dusty like the long dead. Moreover, Gilbert characterises Britain as "This twisted-crooked weary woman." This foul, irritable crone. This mother offers no comfort following the travel, yet gazes down at you with an air of superiority and enquires. This concluding inquiry demonstrates how Gilbert skilfully encapsulates the vernacular of the British majority, utilising it ironically to amplify his disdain.

One of the most pronounced racist incidents that Gilbert observes and participates in occurs while he is at the cinema with Queenie and her father-in-law, who ultimately loses his life at the hands of the American Military Police following a conflict between black and white US servicemen. The police step in during this racist event, resulting in the innocent Arthur Bligh being shot. Tensions escalate when Gilbert refuses to take a seat at the back with the other black individuals.

The usherette attempts to blame the Americans for the racist seating policy, but displays hidden racism that becomes evident in her remarks during the heated moment. Racism is a pervasive issue, as demonstrated by this incident. The Americans openly exhibit their racism, and the incident at the cinema is just one of many times Gilbert experiences it. He encounters an absurd notion that West Indian servicemen are superior to the "American nigger" while stationed in Virginia. There is no effort to disguise the xenophobia; it is articulated.

The white woman here cruelly likens the colored immigrant to a devil. The analogy of colored immigrants to animals is also illustrated in the novel. This reflects the intolerance of white individuals towards blacks or colored people; as Gilbert notes, his skin color generates "tension" among the white population.

Racial prejudice exists within the perceptions of white individuals. For example, while working at the post office, Gilbert faces bias from his white coworkers, who convey their unfavorable views about him. This discriminatory behavior is deeply rooted in the mindset of the white employees at the post office. Furthermore, this constitutes an inhumane treatment directed solely at black individuals like Gilbert. As a result, he suffers repercussions simply for being a black man. They view him as a wild being or creature, one that comes from the jungle. The unacceptable actions linked to racism and bigotry is exposed. When Gilbert starts looking for a place to live, he runs into a lot of bigotry in Britain. He is rejected outright by the landlords.

The common biased viewpoint held by white men. Gilbert faces racial insults and degradation. He encounters derogatory terms and phrases like coon, jungle, darkie, wog, and others. He is subjected to cruel, brutal, and relentless behavior from white men at his job. He endures humiliation and exploitation from the white male workforce. White men dehumanize him, viewing him more as an animal than as a person.

The above data examines the resentful behavior of a white woman and her child towards Hortense in the aftermath of the war in British society. They inflict both physical and psychological torment upon her. Specifically, she endures mockery, degradation, and unfriendly, aggressive treatment from the white child and his mother. She faces racist remarks from the English woman and her child. The English white woman pushes the pram to navigate through the traffic light and bends down to the child, cautioning him: "She isn't black – she's coloured." These statements reveal the racially biased attitude of the white mother.

Similar to her spouse, Gilbert, Hortense also struggles to find employment in England. Hortense faces racial discrimination while pursuing employment. She immigrated to England from Jamaica with hopes of a brighter future. She aspired to become a teacher in England. After settling in England, she submits her application for a teaching position at a school in Islington. Unfortunately, she is not offered that position; instead, she endures hurtful and traumatic incidents of racial discrimination.

During her interview for a teaching position, she faces degrading treatment. The white headmistress at the school in Islington ignores Hortense's correspondence about her teaching experience in Jamaica. She outright denies Hortense the teaching role. The headmistress discriminates against Hortense based on her race. Instead of reading the letters of experience, the headmistress reclines in her chair and begins to play with them. The headmistress rejects Hortense, and racist remarks are added because she completed her teacher training in Jamaica.

Andrea Levy's *Small Island* masterfully sheds light on the racial attitudes of post-war Britain and their far-reaching consequences for individuals and society. Through its multifaceted characters and poignant narrative, the novel captures the deeply entrenched prejudices, the resilience of those who face them, and the hope for understanding and unity in the face of division. It reminds us of the complexity of identity and belonging, encouraging us to reflect on how far we've come and how much further we need to go in addressing racism and building a truly inclusive world.

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