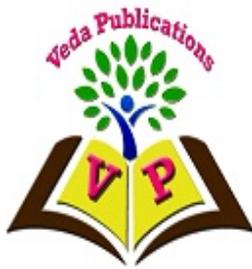




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**SUSTAINABILITY BETRAYED: BRITISH COLONIALISM'S LEGACY IN ECOLOGY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LITERATURE**Samudra Singha Konwar¹, Anup Kumar Dey²¹(PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Assam University, Diphu Campus.)²(Professor, Department of English, Assam University, Silchar.)E-mail- samudrabuddha@gmail.com, anupkumar.dey@aus.ac.inDoi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2025.12411>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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Colonization began in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution but the foundation for the racist British psyche was inadvertently laid much before by the White writers who by glorifying the only skin hue they could see ensured that coloured heroines/heroes were conspicuous by their absence in early British literature. White was right and the singular might in early Britain. With the intermingling of coloured and White races in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the high self-valuation of the Whites ensured that the indigenous in the erstwhile colonies and the resident Blacks in Britain were all affected by racial prejudice. Whites in Britain accustomed to reading racist literature seem to have imbibed the nefarious spirit of xenophobia and even officially enacted multiple Nationality Acts between 1948 to 1981 in order to discourage the coloured from settling permanently in Britain. Writers like Rudyard Kipling and Thomas Babington Macaulay explicitly celebrated supposed White superiority during the British Raj whereas writers like Shakespeare, in a few texts, implicitly glorified the White race at the expense of the coloured. The Whites in Britain, fed for centuries on celebratory White literature and inflated with memories of the all-conquering British Empire, deeply resented the arrival of "second class citizens", as Buchi Emecheta put it, on British shores. Black British citizens are even now offered menial jobs not in accordance with their merit and often face discrimination at their workplace. Britain exited from the European Union supposedly to safeguard her land from the free movement of immigrants and have also exhorted asylum-seekers to seek refuge in Rwanda. Black British residents are facing challenging times with the dominant acting parochial. Racism looks irrevocable in Britain and, for many White Britons, much like during the Colonization era, goodwill for the Other seems to be totally exhausted leaving nothing for the future generations.

Keywords: *Imperialism, Racism, Ecology, Sustainability, Windrush, Brexit.**Author(s) retain the copyright of this article*

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The Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley in his *A Defence of Poetry* says that "In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry" (Shelley 5). If we follow his dictum, then in early Britain as the society was in its nascence, every writer was a poet. British writers during the Old English period, due to the lacuna in interaction between Whites and the colored, did not include the latter in their texts. Shelley, in the same essay, also wrote about poets being "founders of civil society" (7) which means that authors, in a fledgling society, could sway public opinion. The population, thus, flushed with tales celebrating White heroes like Beowulf, were inadvertently led to believe that White is ultimately right and the singular might.

White British writers, in the subsequent generations too, glorified only their ilk even though interaction between them and the colored increased in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Britain, as it aged, during and in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840), had gobbled up colonies in places like Africa and India and many British writers blatantly proclaimed their high self-valuation of the British civilization. The racist "Macaulay's Minute on Education, February 2, 1835" brags that "It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England." (Macaulay 359). Rudyard Kipling too pointed out the supposed unbreachable diversity between the East and the West by writing in "The ballad of East and West" that "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,/ Till

Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;" (Kipling 233). Even writers as canonical as Shakespeare evinced a parochial vein. In *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare shows Caliban ultimately relenting to the supposed finesse of the infringing alien Prospero:

CALIBAN. I'll show thee every fertile inch o'th' island,
And I will kiss thy foot. I prithee, be my god.

(2.2.145-146)

William Shakespeare was prescient enough to adumbrate the consequences arising out of an encounter between an intruding civilization and native people in the latter's own land. The Bard of Avon clearly shows that the indigenous must give up their natural resources for the benefit of the white master and worship the invader as their god. Such compositions by authors aid in the establishment/enhancement of racist White supremacy beliefs. The name Caliban too looks like an anagram of 'cannibal' and one cannot help but wonder if Shakespeare employed such nomenclature to chasten the conquered indigenous as brutes. Writers like Shakespeare incorporated colored characters but did not garnish them with pristine attributes thus not enabling the British public to look up to a character like Othello instead of/ along with the flawlessly supreme White Beowulf. In *Othello*, Shakespeare makes Iago deride the eponymous hero as a "black ram" (1.1.88) thereby coloring blacks with the trait of bestiality. Shakespeare seems to have laid the template for later writers to demean the colored Other both in the colonies and in Britain. In *Jane Eyre*, when the Caribbean-heritage Bertha Mason is brought to Britain, Charlotte Brontë describes her



voluptuous figure as masculine and thereby not complementing the beauty standards constructed for Britons: "A strapper – a real strapper, Jane: big, brown, and buxom" (Brontë 219). Britons were expected to be endowed with "rosy cheeks, a straight nose, and a small cherry mouth" (99). Anyone who did not have such features coveted by white Britons was subjected to racist abuse. Thus, in *Girl, Woman, Other* the black Briton Carole with Nigerian ethnicity desperately tries to cultivate those cherished British features in order to fit in and rise in her profession. Evaristo writes: "Carole came in before going to work looking all *English*, as usual, her navyblue raincoat tied tightly to show off her reduced waist" (Evaristo 157). As Carole's buxom mother Bummi is too garish and hence too African in her appearance, she is contemptuously looked at by none other than her own indoctrinated daughter: "she'd wear her most outlandish Nigerian outfit consisting of thousands of yards of bright material, and a headscarf ten storeys high,...Carole would forever be known as the student with the mad African mother" (131). Britons, heavy with such racist baggage from writers like Bronte, Shakespeare, Kipling and Macaulay would vent injustice on the colored. Thus, in the aforesaid novel, the teacher Penelope would refrain from talking to Bummi or her Black British colleague Shirley.

The watershed year of mass migration of colored people to the United Kingdom is considered to be 1948 as in that year, the ship HMT *Empire Windrush* carrying 1027 passengers and two stowaways docked at Tilbury Docks in Essex. Britain, in the aftermath of the Second World War was scarred by loss of human resources and was forced to welcome the colored Caribbean people into her turf. However, many

Britons fed on centuries of racist literature celebrating the White race were unabashedly frosty towards the multitudes of colored people coming from the Caribbean and the erstwhile British colonies mainly in search for better opportunities in life. Buchi Emecheta in her novel *Second-Class Citizen* posits well the psyche of the people who made a beeline to emigrate: "Going to the United Kingdom must surely be like paying God a visit. The United Kingdom, then, must be like heaven." (Emecheta 2) Racist fault lines seemed to have got indelibly entrenched in the British psyche as the 2019 Booker-winning writer Bernardine Evaristo in *Girl, Woman, Other* delineates: "soon as we landed, people wasn't just unfriendly, they was downright hostile, who were these two monkey people arriving on their likkle island?" (261). Britain, in Britain, carried on with its modus operandi to indoctrinate racism: "classroom walls are decorated with flow charts and diagrams, anatomy drawings, planets orbiting the sun, posters of extinct mammals and a map of the world that makes Britain rival Africa in size, testament to the colonial cartographers who got away with it for centuries, even now, it seems" (219). The jobs offered to the colored Black Britishers were menial and not befitting of their education. Thus, in the novel *Girl, Woman, Other*, a Nigerian PhD holder Augustine gets employment in the United Kingdom as a driver: "Augustine joked he was acquiring a second doctorate in shortcuts, bottlenecks, one-way streets and dead ends while transporting passengers who thought themselves far too superior to talk to him as an equal" (167). Officially too, the United Kingdom brazenly enacted multiple Nationality Acts to deny immigrants the right to settle permanently in Britain.



The book *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK* posits the xenophobic attitude of Brits at the helm of governmental affairs: "However, between 1948 and 1981, successive migration laws and other policies restricted the rights of certain British and commonwealth citizens to unrestricted entry and settlement in the UK, these were often based on racialized grounds so impacted on non-white citizens in particular" (Byrne et al. 37-38). The British, despite positioning itself as multicultural, thus officially portrayed itself as racist. Britain was formally protecting its land from potential settlers with a different skin hue. In the wake of the Mau Mau rebellion (1952-1960) as many Kenyans fled for British shores, the British made them feel frostily unwelcome by enacting amendments in the Immigration Act of 1971 under which a new system of permits was introduced. The book *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK* states that in 1981, according to the Nationality Act, 'Citizens of the United Kingdom or Colonies' (CUKC) could permanently stay in the country only if they had "close connections to the UK" (Byrne et al. 38). Clearly the Britishers, after years of intruding into foreign countries had no shame in presenting the unwelcome sign to foreigners. Brexit too showed the British tendency to prevent the intermingling of myriad races. Despite being the face of Europe militarily, economically and in various other aspects, Britain withdrew officially from the European Union on 31 January 2020. Staying in the European Union would have meant complying with the Brussels-initiated policy of open borders encouraging influx of immigrants and Britishers were not happy with that as evident in the referendum held on 23 June 2016 in which a majority 51.89% opted in favor of a divorce

from the European Union. Britain clearly promotes her own. She goes out to conquer other territories but unashamedly officially ensures that cultural invasion of Britain in any proportion is not welcome. The racist past is apparently sonorously pronounced in Britain even in contemporary times. Now Britain publicly runs campaigns exhorting people to visit Rwanda which is the very place where it intends its asylum seekers to go. Britain apparently is in no mood to accommodate foreigners. It intruded at will into other places but is obstinately not willing to reciprocate alien intrusions into its own land.

Edward Said was visionary enough to note the nefarious role of writers toeing the racist British line. He, in his *Orientalism* (1978) wrote about subjectivity creeping into a writer and states that a writer can never really shake off her/his identity while writing about the Orient and hence, she/he will always reek of racism:

For if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. (Said 11)

Said further added that Western Imperialism sought the "distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts" (12). He meant that Colonization and certain writers tangoed together for



the colonizer's nefarious national interest at the cost of the colonized natives. Every plunder was, thus, endeavored to be justified and, along with other scars, it was the economy of the colonized countries that primarily bore the brunt.

The feeding of the British belly was fueled by the unsustainable ecological malpractices bugled by Britain in places like the Niger delta and India. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the character Bummi laments the loss of forests and mineral resources amid the insatiable greed of Europeans: "the whole Delta knew, yet how else to survive in that devastated place where millions of barrels of oil are suctioned up by the gargantuan drills of the oil companies from thousands of meters down into the earth to provide precious energy for the rest of the planet while the land that produces it is left to rot"(Evaristo 159). Bummi further illustrates the mockery the Britons made of ecological sustainability: "they fled the toxic fumes that made breathing the very air difficult because to inhale deeply was to die slowly...they fled the acid rain that made the water undrinkable...they fled the oil spills poisoning the crops, the diseased fisheries in the soupy creeks, the fishing baskets lifted out of the water congealed with gummy black oil...crayfish, crab, lobster-don die" (Evaristo 160). In India too, peasants were coerced into cultivating cash crops like indigo instead of the local food crops thus pushing generations into a chain of destitution and when natives of such maniacally-ravaged countries aspired to have better lives in Britain, their dreams got challenged by British racism.

The racism experienced by the colored in Britain is, according to Buchi Emecheta, exacerbated by the immigrants themselves. Blacks in Britain are a divided

house and, owing to their mutual cultural differences, can never act in unison against injustice, thus themselves maiming their scope of sustenance. Emecheta in *Second-Class Citizen*, through the principal protagonist Adah, does not belie the fact that mutual animosity among the colored is making it easier for British Whites to employ racist praxis:

Thinking about her first year in Britain, Adah could not help wondering whether the real discrimination, if one could call it that, that she experienced was not more the work of her fellow-countrymen than of the whites. Maybe if the blacks could learn to live harmoniously with one another, maybe if a West Indian landlord could learn not to look down on the African, and the African learn to boast less of his country's natural wealth, there would be fewer inferiority feelings among the blacks. (80-81)

The author Candice Carty-Williams, in her book *Queenie*, also portrays the bitterness among colored communities in Britain as the eponymous character is humiliated as "the big kalabitch" (204) by a Pakistani woman. This shaming of people based on the color of their skin is, thus, extant even among the colored in Britain. They might all be colored and collectively derided as "second-class" (Emecheta42) by the White Britons but there are prevalent hierarchies based on whose skin is darker and whose culture is supposedly superior. Thus, apart from browns contemptuously shaming the darker skin hue of the blacks, the black Yorubas derided the black Igbos by asking them "what human flesh tasted like" (Emecheta18). Among the colored in Britain, there are blacks who want to remain blacks, there are blacks who want to be



white, there are blacks like the Igbos who hate other blacks like the Yorubas and vice versa. Thus, British colonialism officially ended but opened a Pandora's box of troubles as it formally exited the colonies. The Britons came, conquered, got rich, remained parochial, practiced racism, made the 'Other' poor and circumstantially forced a whole lot of a motley potpourri of culturally diverse aspirational colored people in Britain together into one xenophobic house. Britain committed the ecological, human, economic and literary crimes but still sits cozy as an important country with a titillating aspirational quotient.

As a legacy of British colonization, the rise of mimickers coveting Britain looks irrevocable with the seemingly indelible colonial machinery still extant, thriving and on an upswing in the erstwhile colonies. 'Blaxit' or the formal exit of Blacks from Britain looks unlikely with a very vocal world vox populi contemporaneously and public denouncement or expulsion of Black Brits would be gross violation of human rights which, thus, can never be officially entertained but innately in many White British hearts, 'Blaxit' seems to have already happened. White Britons are merely carrying on their old colonialism-era nefarious habit of kicking everything indigenous and deviant into misery. English, a British product, once local, is now almost global. The same cannot be spoken about Hindi or Yoruba or Igbo language as English is entrenched deep even in faraway erstwhile colonized lands and forever growing like an invasive species depleting local language speakers. Even writers as celebrated as the Indian Nirad C. Chaudhuri seemed so indoctrinated and intoxicated with his cherished Britain that in his

dedication penned in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, he panegyricized the British Raj with the following words: "All that was good and living within us was made, shaped, and quickened by the same British rule" (Chaudhuri 1968). The indigenous cultures, therefore, seem to have undergone double marginalization: first by the colonizing Britishers and now by themselves. The dominant was and is parochial. However, the seemingly irrevocable attitude to unjustifiably ape racist Britain needs to change or else, the perpetuity of hard times for the colored will be sustained.

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