

THE SLAVE TRADE TURNED UPSIDE DOWN – because truth is just a power trip

(Review of *Blonde Roots*)

Author: Mark Meynell (All Souls Langham Place)

Keywords: racism, truth, power, Nietzsche, prejudice, slavery, slave trade, Africa

Book title: *Blonde Roots*

Author: Bernardine Evaristo

Publisher: Hamish Hamilton (London)

Publication Date: 2008

Pages: 261pp

One Friday in 1968, Jane Elliott carried out an experiment with her Year 4 pupils in a typical all-white town in Iowa. This experiment became world-renowned and propelled her into a new career as a full-time 'diversity trainer'.

The concept was simple: communicate the horrors of racism by giving the children a taste of the racist's medicine. She informed the class that eye colour was a scientifically proven means by which to determine somebody's value and abilities. Brown-eyes meant a person was more able and had greater potential than those with blue eyes. 'Blueys' were untrustworthy, lazy and stupid. To avoid confusion, even those with only marginally blue eyes were made to wear identifying armbands. Elliott deliberately praised the 'brownies' and gave them privileges, while constantly disparaging the others. And sure enough, the brown-eyes became arrogant, malicious and superior, while the blue-eyes became cowed and fumbling. Then, on the following Monday, she announced that the research had it the wrong way round. The roles were reversed, as were the pupils' reactions.

This is not the place to discuss the ethics of the exercise on such young children, but it does provoke crucial questions. How on earth do we help an ethnic majority to understand the realities of racism? What needs to be done to expose any lurking prejudice?

Bernardine Evaristo's answer was to write a novel. *Blonde Roots* is the daring and shocking result. Her premise is equally simple. What if it had been Africans who enslaved Europeans for 400 years, and not the other way around? What would that have looked, and more importantly *felt*, like? As someone who is half-English, half-Nigerian, she is perhaps more well-suited to write this book than most.

A Parallel Universe of Unsettling Echoes

Evaristo's writing is vibrant but interspersed with a biting wit. Hers is an alien universe that bears enough echoes of our own for the book to be deliberately unsettling. Not only is history turned upside down, so is geography – and she's had a lot of fun with that. 'Aphrika' sits in Europe's place, and 'Europa' in Africa's. Off the coast of Aphrika sits the United Kingdom of Ambossa, with its capital, Londolo (whose boroughs include, Mayfah, To Ten Ha Ma and Brixane). Where one might expect the Caribbean West Indies, we find the West Japanese Islands, and so on.

Aphrika, and in particular the UKofA, rules the waves. Consequently its worldview dominates all others. This can be seen in a number of ways:

- The dominant religion in Aphrika, and therefore also in the West Japanese slave plantations, is what we would recognize as African animism. Christianity is seen as an indigenous 'Europan' religion that survives into plantation life, albeit in a syncretized form (e.g. p29) - just as in fact happened in 'real history' with the emergence of Haitian Voodoo, for example.

- When it comes to dress, the Aphrikans wear bush-clothing, whatever the weather. The narrator describes her captors: *All the stories I'd heard were true because even though it was cold, they wore only cotton strips to cover their privates so they shivered and sneezed and were covered with goose pimples... I didn't know then that they would rather suffer chilblains, frostbite, the dreaded influenza and even death, than dress like the [white] natives.* (p66) Thus, prejudice runs deeper than sartorial convenience – which of course evokes flip-side images (perhaps from a Merchant-Ivory film) of puce, double-barrelled British officials dressed to the nines under the sweltering African or Indian sun.
- A person's name is of course integral to their identity and culture. So for slaves to be forcibly renamed with Aphrikan names is not merely a matter of their masters' convenience. It is statement about cultural suppression, if not obliteration. The book's protagonist is called Doris Scagglethorpe – but not by her masters. To them, she is the scrawny blonde slavewoman Omorenomwara. The perceptions of beauty are completely subverted (which itself serves to satirize the absurd fads of the contemporary fashion industry) so that blonde, thin and blue-eyed is ugly, while the darker, larger and more bangled is beautiful. It just proves that beauty is determined by the eye of the oppressor.

The Agonies of the Slave

Doris is a doughty survivor – she is clearly making the best of a terrible job. But the poignancy of her predicament is overwhelming at times. She was captured as a young girl in a forest near her home in Europa – a day that she would haunt her for the rest of her life:

If only I'd not been in shock. If only I'd been older, wiser, more quick-witted, braver, I might have taken that one chance to run away. I was a fast runner. He was too cumbersome to be agile. I was unshackled. I still recognised that part of the forest. It would soon be dark. I would have found my way home. If only I'd known then that I had already lost my family and neighbourhood, that I would soon lose my name, my language and my country, then my stupid legs would have taken the risk – I'd have dashed into the undergrowth without a backward glance. (p60)

The awful thing about her capture was that it was done by fellow 'Europeans' – all part of the balance of power between colonial Aphrikans and the pragmatic but avaricious natives. In fact, Evaristo has a nice twist on 'real' history here. She takes an historically resonant, English aristocratic name (Lord Perceval Montague) and gives it to the feudal masters who collaborate with the slave traders. Thus:

The slave raiders, it seemed, were in cahoots with aristocrats like Percy and the middlemen who supplied them with slaves for shipment overseas. Criminals and prisoners of war were hot favourites, but when they weren't available it was anyone who could be captured, so long as they weren't too old or, in Percy's case, his own serfs. Children were taken too. Some said that the guns the greedy aristocrats received in exchange for slaves encouraged them to start more wars just to meet the demand of the slave traders who wanted a yearly increase in exports. (p54)

Of course, such titles and feudalism were irrelevant to the conquering Aphrikans. Since racist prejudice lay at the heart of the trade, indigenous social strata were no ultimate protection against capture – Lord Percy himself eventually ends up on the plantations, alongside his serfs, as plain old Adongo. Doris never hints at a rosy-tinted nostalgia for the social structures of home – it had its own injustices aplenty (as her family experienced from being at the bottom of the pile) – and by implication, nor does Evaristo for the tribal structures of historical Africa. Life is simply harsh and cruel.

But racism profoundly compounds the injustices. Thus Doris notes:

I could see how the Ambossans had hardened their hearts to our humanity. They convinced themselves that we do not feel as they do, so that they do not have to feel anything for us. It's very convenient and lucrative for them. (p25)

Then later:

Slavers sailed to the coast of Europa where they bartered for my people with beads, knives, hats, gourds, bowls, spears, muskets, bolts of cotton, brandy, rum, kettles, even. It's nice to know what you're worth. (p72)

Her experiences in Londolo and then in the Caribbean plantations are appalling – like countless millions, she was separated from family, then mercilessly driven, exploited, beaten and humiliated. Worse still are the regular but absurd, pseudo-scientific justifications for the necessity of treating the 'Europanes' or 'Caucasoi' like this. Take this from the captors:

Furthermore, the Caucasoi is unable to calculate mental arithmetic beyond what they call their 'ten times table'. Because the Caucasoid brain is so stunted, it has also naturally led to somewhat blunted emotions. Along with the beasts of burden who work the fields, the Caucasoi is incapable of acute emotionality because, due to its Neo-Primate state, it is but a few steps up from the animal kingdom with its primary preoccupations of Perambulate, Agitate, Capitulate, Somnambulate, Ejaculate, Procreate, Masticate, Procrastinate and Hibernate.

Nor, when the Caucasoi receives physical 'pain', does he suffer in the same way as me and thee. Beating the hide of a Caucasoi is more akin to beating the hide of a camel to make it go faster. Be not hoodwinked into thinking that the blood shed and the skin torn of the Caucasoi is a crime against humanity, no matter how much they shed crocodile tears to convince the gullible among you otherwise.

Surely even you diehard liberals are by now doubting your old verities?

...To put it in simple terms, the Caucasoid breed is not of our kind. (p120)

But for some readers, the shocking thing is not so much that any human being is talked about like this, but that it is white people in view here. That just doesn't happen! Whites suffering at the hands of blacks! That's just not right – *is it?* For the white majority (whose prosperity today is, at the very least, partially the result of the slave trade), this is a jolt. The reader cannot but be provoked into a reaction. It is a bit like that probing question: if you see a black man driving past in a Rolls Royce, what do you assume? That he's the chauffeur? Or the owner? And if the latter, how does that make you feel? Jealous of him? Angry at him? Pleased for him?

Going Beyond Satire

Blonde Roots is full of literary and historical resonances – including aping pro-slaving 'eye-witness accounts' of the civilising effects of slavery, and, most tellingly, Joseph Conrad's seminal novel about exploitation in Belgian Congo, *The Heart of Darkness*. Chief Kaga Konata Katamba 1 visits Europa in order to understand its culture but finds himself appalled by its backwardness and savagery. He meets an Aphrikan who had gone native (à la Conrad's Mr Kurtz) – and describes entering 'the Heart of Greyness' (p128). His responses range from a greater determination to enslave to the creation of the 'International Society for the Suppression of Savage Beliefs and Customs' (p138), which is motivated by the absurdity, as he sees it, of the 'pagan' beliefs about a saviour on a cross and their appalling treatment of 'witches'. I suppose His reaction is not so different from that of the British Raj when confronted with the Hindu practice of *sati* or *suttee* (the ritual killing of widows on their husband's funeral pyre).

But Evaristo has gone far beyond satirizing historical racism in all this. Hers is an altogether bleaker world. She is not seeking to score points about whites and blacks – the thrust seems merely to be that we're no different from one another. Rather, she implies it was merely an accident of history, geography and opportunity that whites enslaved blacks. It could so easily have been the other way around, as in this book. So there is no flabby optimism about human nature here. In the end it is all a question of power: who, at any given time, has the

power to determine truth and morality? No wonder she prefaced the book with a quotation from that proto-postmodern himself, Nietzsche: *All things are subject to interpretation: whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.* In the book, fashions, customs, religions, the value of human life - everything in fact – are determined by the dominant.

While the narrative trips along, it is easy to be swept into the same conclusion. She presents many challenging and unsettling insights in the course of the narrative. That is one way in which this is so compelling. However, at times I just want to shout, “not so fast!” Truth is not *merely* the function of power. It can be and often has. But that doesn’t mean it always is. And what if the truth chooses to deny himself and surrender to power, in order to overcome those powers. For actually, the cross, in all its despair, cruelty and absurdity is the real answer to power that controls, manipulates and oppresses. As G K Chesterton once remarked, “*The cross cannot be defeated - for it is defeat*”. But therein lies its victory! And in the end, after the horrors, injustices and continuing agonies caused by slavery, that is probably the only answer we can have. This is the last verse from Edward Shillito’s poem, ‘Jesus of the Scars’, written shortly after the end of the First World War.

*The other gods were strong; but thou was weak;
They rode, thou didst stumble to a throne
But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak
And not a god has wounds, but thou alone.*