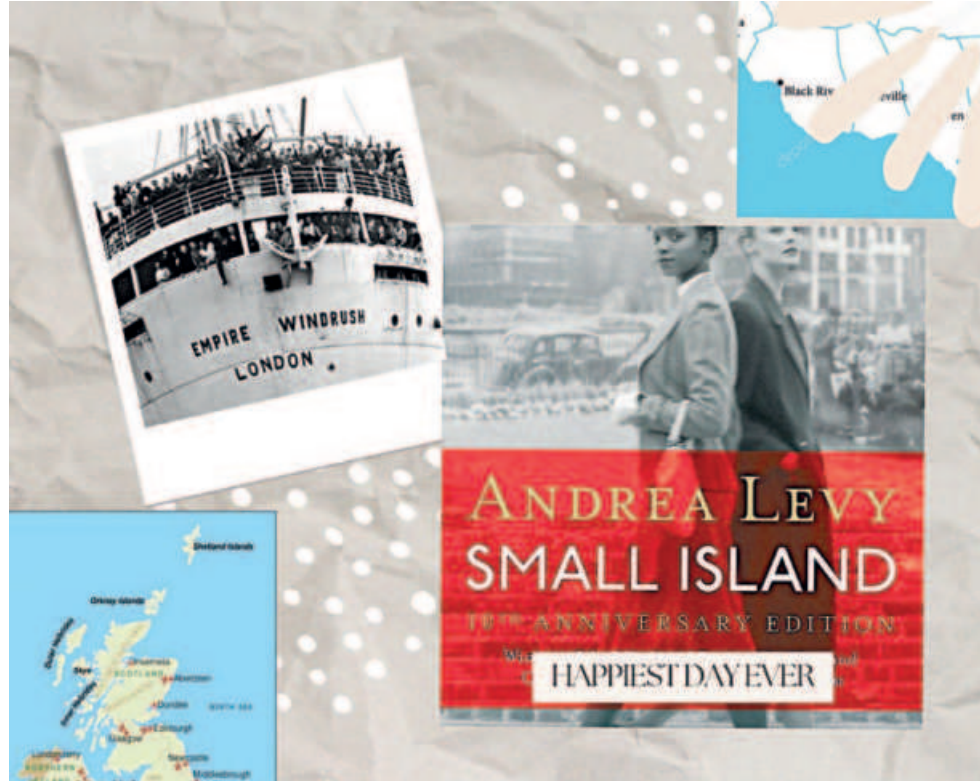


# Andrea Levy's *Small Island*: Racial Conflict in Postwar Britain and a Commentary on Our World

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SOHANA MANZOOR

A daughter of immigrant parents, Andrea Levy wrote mostly on the struggles of Jamaican immigrants in England. Critically acclaimed *Small Island* (2004) is one of her best-known books and it attempts to visualize the days before, during, and after the Second World War. The problems explored here are in many ways also relatable to the conflicts taking over the world today. Levy weaves her story through two couples, one black and the other white, and delivers a complex tale of racial conflicts and the emergence of a new world.

The events of *Small Island* are propelled by the Nationality Act of 1948. After the Great War, facing a tremendous crisis in the work force, the British Government passed the Act which welcomed people from the colonies as British citizens. The Caribbean Islands saw many of its children migrating to the British Isles. Aldwyn "Lord Kitchener" Roberts, a Trinidadian and former nightclub vocalist was a leading immigrant who had joined the Windrush, even composed a song capturing the spirit of migration:

London is the place for me  
London, this lovely city  
You can go to France or America  
India, Asia or Australia  
But you must come back to London city.

Gilbert and Hortense are a couple who left Jamaica to start a new life in England. With her lighter coloured skin and the certificate of a school teacher, Hortense had hoped to fare better than the average immigrant. But she is totally crushed when the interviewers simply reject her credentials by saying, "You're not qualified to teach here in England." She realizes that like all other immigrants, to make a living she has to rely on her skills of sewing and baking.

When Gilbert had joined the army, he was promised that he would achieve greatness beyond expectation by being able to become a wireless operator, or an air-gunner, or flight engineer. But in reality, he was forced to become a mere driver. Almost all the black people during the War were employed as common labor. The popular war-time movies display this discrimination by putting the white hero in the foreground, the black figure visible only when it is necessary to glorify the British, or American whiteness against the Nazis or communism.

Little wonder that color becomes the biggest problem for them. On the streets, they are greeted with comments like, "Oi,

darkie, show us yer tail" Moreover, Guilbert and many others like him hear in silence the ignorant comments of the British who use sugar, drink tea, but have not the slightest idea where Jamaica or Ceylon might be. The inhabitants of the British colonies are taught everything about England, but when they expect the tiniest gesture of interest or acknowledgement from the so-called mother-country, they are snubbed.

That brings us to the historically famous British Empire Exhibition that Queenie, as a little girl, visits in the first chapter of *Small Island*. The great Exhibition was an endeavor on part of the British Government right after the First World War to showcase the British Empire. Queenie's father introduced her to it as: "See here, Queenie. Look around. You've got the whole world at your feet, lass." Then Queenie reports her encounter with the African man who surprised her and her companions by speaking clear English. Most of the British people of the time expected the people from Africa to understand only the language of drums, squat in the woods instead of using proper latrines, and devoid of all civilized behavior. Little Queenie, therefore, is disturbed with her meeting of this African man who acted more civilly than his British counterparts.

Queenie's attitude toward the colonized goes under considerable change during the War when she faces it alone in the absence of her husband Bernard. She also develops a brief romantic relationship with the airman Michael Roberts, a young airman from Jamaica. When Guilbert and Hortense come to live in her house as boarders, she is already close to giving birth to Michael's child. Her relationship with him is also historically significant. While stationed in Britain, many black soldiers developed relations with white women, most of which didn't survive the war.

Queenie's husband Bernard Bligh is a very traditional middle-class Englishman who joined the Second World War being pressurized by his peers. Even though in many respects he is a man of principle, he is also too uptight. Brought up to believe that the British are the most civilized and best among nations, his comments over the natives of India are quite racist. He is fastidious about his routine life and hence unwilling to adjust.

However, the birth of Queenie's son dramatically transforms the world for all of them. Queenie confesses to her husband about her affair, and strangely enough, a

change comes over Bernard. He actually grows attached to the baby, and sings to it while his wife sleeps. He even offers to keep the child with them and rear him as their own. This gesture on Bernard's part redeems him, but Queenie is the one to reject his solution. The actual birth of the child makes her realize some basic truths about life. She asks Hortense and Guilbert to take her child and bring it up away from the scrutiny of the white gaze.

"Identity is an invention," says Hall in "Minimal Selves." Identity for him "is formed at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narrative of history of a culture." By the end of *Small Island* not only little Michael gets an identity, but all the four characters virtually shift their identities in different ways. For Hortense and Guilbert, the change is most drastic as from being simply Jamaicans they become "black British," a term with a number of connotations of which they had no conception at all.

Even though *Small Island* ends on a kind of reconciliatory note as Hortense and Gilbert leave with Queenie's colored child, it is still far from a compromise. In their last verbal battle, Guilbert yells at Bernard:

"You know what your trouble is man? Your white skin. You think it makes you better than me. You think it gives you right to lord it over a black man. But you know what it make you? It make you white. . . . No better, no worse than me—just white."

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## University of Dhaka: A tale of two eras

ANJUMAN ARA

1921  
I was rooted in foot  
amid visibly green grasslands of Bengal  
Holding the souls in person  
amateurs, experts,  
admirers, critics,  
curious, anxious,  
Bengali, non Bengali,  
in my Dhakai landscape.

2021  
I walked online  
soaring in the cosy clouds of Zoom  
Boarding the spirits on screen  
experienced, novice,  
confused, confident,  
dislocated, distressed,  
visible, invisible,  
on my virtual platforms.

We had to rise through chaos and conflicts  
Beating off doubts and worries.  
We ventured to wander  
and cultivate our raw minds of wonder;  
We had to embark on the new  
with little logistics and materials,  
to meet the unlimited wants,  
demands, worries and queries of Bengal,  
to build new dreams, desires and destinations for Bengal.



white people can address each other. Even the language, even when it is English, is different. At the end of *A Passage to India*, the peace offering had come from a white man, "Why can't we be friends now? It's what I want. It's what you want." But friendship can only happen between people with equal standing, not between races that have been in the relationship of master and slave for centuries. There might be many individual good people in both cultures and societies, but the racial tension that is disrupting the world today, has a tremendously complex history and there is no way it can simply dissolve.

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Mr. Smith, if only you saw,  
how we were guided by an "invisible hand", as you said,  
of an unexplored supply of limited resources  
against an increasing demand of an unyielding time,  
Only to invest our tiny assets for a bigger gain -  
'Late', they say! 'But better late than never'!  
We built on crises - physical, mental, psychological, educational, national, local, and, of course, financial.  
1921  
Donated lands by generous hands,  
Aspiring intellects born in local lands,  
Hired academics from foreign fields,  
Wondering students, though very few,  
Crossing boundaries, barriers, not anew,  
Only to lead us through agonies  
And bring in glories,  
local, marginal, national and international, joined to create histories

2021  
Chased through panting lanes  
by insolent COVID-19,  
Dislocating our folks to remote realms,  
Only to stumble at exclusive data pack,  
And fall off to unaffordable devices,  
The tech savvy novice wizards with advanced skills,  
The experienced minds with refined thoughts, rejoined to create histories

Great minds walked through 1921 and 2021  
For a century of great glories  
Awaiting further wonders in further decades

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## A Crypto Question

BY MOZAMMEL HAQUE RANJU

I want to know how you gulp down  
An entire bottle of tranquil 'love'  
In this sterile, abhorrent time!

You play shoddy game with words!  
In an instant haste -  
You produce opaque poetry  
Using paltry nuances and metaphors.

Ah, love is not safe in your hand!  
It's just a commotion -  
An erotic surge  
Of your surrogate twisted mind.  
You brew mundane words  
Into rhyme and rhythm -  
You craft love as a mere carnal thing  
In masterly charm.

An ill-fated maestro that you are,  
Your mesogenic soul beseeches a reprieve  
From medieval diaspora of

pathogenic love.  
Your forlorn manic mind  
And your irate brain  
Fail to determine the very essence of love!

I want to ask you this brute question -  
When your mingled mind  
Minced and scrabble a rogue copulation  
On a helpless paper -  
And your obscene obsessions  
Jeer and moan sadistic verses  
Within the inner realm of your malicious soul -  
Don't these clever acts and episodes  
Spare you?  
For the heinous crime you are committing  
Nonchalantly -  
Every time?

All these I want to know.

Ranju, a fading poet, found an inner voice that tells him to delay his retreat.

