

MARK STEIN, *Black British Literature. Novels of Transformation*, Columbus (The Ohio State University Press) 2004, 243 p.

Over the last couple of decades, articles concerned with black British literature have flooded scholarly journals, monographs about various aspects of black British literature have been published, and conferences are being organised to disseminate work on black British literature, black British themes, black British writers. Consequently, universities have begun to incorporate black British texts and the critical reflections about black writing in Britain into their courses. Mark Stein's excellent and meticulous study ›Black British Literature. Novels of Transformation‹ should be part of any course on black British literature, if not as a course book, then, at least, as a recommendation both for beginners and experts.

In his book Stein centres on a number of well-established British-born and British-based authors, – let me just mention a random few, – Salman Rushdie, David Dabydeen, Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith, Andrea Levy, Diran Adebayo, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Maggie Gee and their novels of transformation. Stein's exhaustive, and detailed exploration of black British novels of transformation expertly engages with the richness and complexity of the authors' writings. One of the outstanding achievements of ›Black British Literature. Novels of Transformation‹ is its combination of theoretical concepts, sensitivity to cultural, historical, political and social contexts (e. g. Windrush generation, immigration policy, social hardship, discrimination, institutional racism), and the highly novel and innovative interdisciplinary ap-

proach to this specific genre. Not only does Stein's book point to the heterogeneity of black British literature as such, it also – and equally significant –, awakens conscience and consciousness, raises cultural sensitivity and awareness in the (culturally sensitive) readers, highlighting as it does, the performative functions of the black British novels of transformations. Emphasizing the novels' plural cultural attachments, these texts “portray and purvey the transformation, the reformation, the repeated “coming of age” of British cultures” (xiii) in a post-imperial era. Of course, this necessitates that the texts Stein chooses be situated in both historical – in a very broad sense – and literary contexts. Thus, his book neatly and ingeniously links up and critically engages with topical issues such as cultural hybridity, diversity and difference, multiculturalism, Britishness, and Englishness. Stein's objective is to “develop a framework for theorizing the field of black British fiction by engaging with post-colonial theory and black cultural studies. This framework constitutes an approach to a highly popular field of cultural production” (xiii). No doubt, Stein's interdisciplinary framework proves immensely useful – as particularly the later sections of his book impressively show. However, it begs the question why Stein refrains from specifying the implications of the very comprehensive concepts such as *syncretism*, *ambivalence*, *mimicry*, *hybridity* etc. It is uncontested that ‘post-colonial theory’ is by no means an unambiguous theory, and it is further uncontested that ‘black cultural studies’ is an umbrella term covering a variety of concerns and issues. To me, a clarification of his positions would have been appropriate particularly in this introductory chapter.

Stein's theses are that, first, the novel of transformation is a “dominant form in black British literature” (xiii) and second, that these novels “portray and purvey the transformation, the reformation [...] of British cultures under the influence of ‘outsiders within’” (xiii). The criteria for the choice of the selected texts is determined by the texts' publication dates. That is to say that he focuses on black British novels of transformation of the late 20th century, however, without disregarding earlier texts of the same genre that may have left an impact upon later ones in terms of theme, and aesthetic tradition. This offers the readers a wide spectrum of works that all, to different degrees, concern:

[t]he construction of a place called home; access to and release from a history that is one's own merely in part; effects of migration and displacement onto subsequent generations; the combinations of different aesthetic traditions and the interdependence of distinct cultural territories; the vexed issues of identity (personal, cultural, ethnic, national identity); phenomena of intermixture and cultural hybridity, cultural difference and the notorious problem of racism; the process of cultural change, of creating new spaces, of transformation [...]. (xi)

One wonders how he manages to deal with all these issues but he does – very successfully so.

Stein's book is divided into two main parts, Part I and Part II, each of which is subdivided into chapters. Part I has two chapters which are subdivided into smaller sections, which, unfortunately, are not mentioned separately in the table of contents. Part II has three chapters, which are also subdivided into smaller units. The reader is smoothly guided from the more general Part I to the highly specific Part II.

Chapter 1 of Part I deals with “Black British Literature, Post-colonial Studies, and the Bildungsroman”. At the beginning of this chapter, Stein briefly touches upon Paul Gilroy's well-established and widely used concept of the Black Atlantic. For Stein's purpose, Gilroy's concept proves particularly rich since the black British novel of transformation is also marked by its connections with other cultural territories. In what follows in Part I, Stein initially traces the “uses” (7), as he calls it, of the term ‘black’ British literature. However, before embarking on this investigation, Stein concentrates on the topical sociological, political and cultural issues of: What is ‘black’ about ‘black?’, and the construction of new ethnic identities, based on Stuart Hall's influential article “The New Ethnicities”. What is important is that black British does not designate a homogeneous social group, the members of which share experiences of margin-

alization, diasporization, uprootedness, racism etc., but rather a plurality of experiences, thus making the political and cultural concept of black British identities a much more pluralist one. Stein then transfers these insights onto a delineation and delimitation of the contested notion of black British literature. Fully aware of the impossibility of achieving a precise, all-encompassing definition, Stein argues that 'Black British literature' should certainly not be conceived of as a monolithic concept, as was the case a couple of years ago. Black British literature does not exclusively denote a single, singular (textual) experience, precisely because "it covers an imagined experiential field of overlapping territories" (17). Especially interesting here is Stein's suggestion of a 'plural-alliance model' which not only acknowledges the various affiliations and connections that mark much of contemporary writing, but which also allows one to read a black British author's work – take for example, Buchi Emecheta's, in Nigerian, 'Black British' and transcultural contexts.

Stein's next larger section deals with the black British novel of transformation. The readers learn that this particular genre has two functions: it is about the transformation of its protagonist and the transformation of British society and its cultural institutions. It is very illuminating that Stein traces the origin of the bildungsroman in a number of different cultural contexts, showing that the bildungsroman, widely used in English literature (›Great Expectations‹, ›David Copperfield‹, ›Jane Eyre‹), is a 19th century phenomenon. Generally speaking, the bildungsroman is a novel of education for life through life, its focus is an individual protagonist undergoing the process of character formation, undergoing a crisis, overcoming the hardships and finally assuming a recognized position in the community or the society. Given this catalogue of features, it is not astonishing that Stein concludes that the bildungsroman is marked by a "conservative bend" (23). And yet: In his analyses of black British novels of transformation Stein shows that the black British bildungsroman, – what a shame we do not learn why he uses bildungsroman in some instances, novel of transformation in others –, is anything but conservative. Comparing and contrasting bildungsroman and black British novel of transformation, Stein presents us with an overview of similarities and differences. First, the black British novel of transformation is not necessarily characterized by the protagonist's move from the country to the city and back. The second feature concerns the conflict of generations which is part and parcel of almost any novel of transformation. In the black British novel of transformation, however, the generational conflict is almost always also a cultural one – generated by a clash of cultural values, world-views, beliefs, and norms between a generation that migrated to Britain and one that was born there. Stein proves his point by discussing Adebayo's ›Some Kind of Black‹ (1997), and Levy's ›Every Light in the House Burnin'‹ (1994). Moreover, it is argued that unlike many protagonists in 'conventional' versions of the bildungsroman, protagonists of black British novels of transformation not only come to terms with their identity, but, and this is crucial, they voice their identity. The texts, then, in a symbolic act, carve out this space, and create a public space. This finding presented at the end of Chapter 1 perfectly links up with Chapter 2 of Part I which is devoted to "Performative Functions of the Black British Novel of Transformation". In the introductory paragraph to this chapter, Stein repeats what has already been put forward in the introduction: the novels of transformation are characterized by two distinct types of performative functions. First, and I shall recapitulate, as Stein does, that

[T]he novel of transformation portrays and purveys the transformation, the reformation, the repeated "coming of age" of British cultures under the influence of "outsiders within" (xiii). [...] On the one hand, on the thematic level, novels of transformation depict the process of growing up. On the other hand, these fictions are not only inscribed by the cultures they inhabit, they in turn mold those very cultures. (36)

In what follows, Stein discusses a great variety of texts, and brilliantly outlines the specificities of either 'category'. From his analyses of Meera Syal's ›Anita and Me‹ (1996), Diran Adebayo's

›Some Kind of Black‹ (1997), Abdulrazak Gurnah's ›Dottie‹ (1990), David Dabydeen's ›Disappearance‹ (1993), Amit Chaudhuri's ›Afternoon Raag‹ (1993), Andrea Levy's ›Every Light in the House Burnin'‹ (1994), Hanif Kureishi's ›The Buddha of Suburbia‹ (1990), Atima Srivastava's ›Transmission‹ (1992) we learn that the two functions figure prominently in either of the novels, in some to a greater extent than in others. Thus, the two functions cannot be neatly separated and do not need to be neatly separated. What Stein wishes to emphasize upon is the fact that texts are part of the processes they deal with. This can be accounted for by the performative functions of the novel of transformation, which involve the construction of new subject positions (›Anita and Me‹, ›Some Kind of Black‹, for example), the reimagination and redress of the images of Britain including the national boundaries, the depiction of racism (›Every Light in the House Burnin'‹), and last, but not least, the representation, exertion, and normalization of black British cultural power (›Anita and Me‹, ›Transmission‹).

Chapter Three of Part II is dedicated to “Crossing a Notion – The (Im)Possibility of Returning”. At the centre of his considerations are the two “diasporic bildungsromane” (94) ›Lara‹ (1997) by Bernardine Evaristo and ›Fruit of the Lemon‹ (1999) by Andrea Levy. In the introductory paragraphs Stein not only argues that many black British novels treat the issues of departure(s) and return(s) which mark them as diasporic ones but also, that particularly with regards to form, these diasporic bildungsromane are located in more than one context, more than one tradition, more than one geography. This is also true of a number of protagonists and their stories. Stein's underlying theoretical concepts centre around the phenomena of diaspora (based on Stuart Hall and James Clifford's explications), ‘home’ (Rosemary Marangoly George's insights; home as a locus of self-identity, of assured self-knowledge and of being represented), memory and identity (mainly based on Paul Gilroy's views). Stein critically engages with and sensitively expands on these complex issues, yet unfortunately, touches upon the memory issue as far as its theorization is concerned only in passing. Apparently, Stein is more interested in diaspora, diasporan identities and diaspora aesthetic. Diasporan identities, Stein argues, are shaped by “ongoing self-transformation” (65), and the diasporan experience, according to Stein, is always decisively multilocalized (cf. 65). These theoretical insights allow him to situate, read and analyse Evaristo and Levy's text as multilocalized, and their protagonists actively thriving on multiple attachments and affiliations, Lara in ›Lara‹ more so than Faith in ›Fruit of the Lemon‹. His in-depth analysis shows that the two wandering protagonists not so much discover roots but chart routes, seeking to clarify for themselves how they relate to their (family) histories. They explore the limits of their own history, the limits of their retrievability, the workings of memory, its capacities and functions, and they actively claim personal and collective pasts, give new meanings to their present and presence, discovering their own creative potentials. One of the specificities of the diasporic bildungsroman is, as Stein's insightful and sensitive discussion of Lara and Faith shows, that these characters are not exposed to the (inter)-play of history, culture and power, – by sheer coincidence as it were, but rather, and this is essential, that they expose themselves and learn to use these discourses productively.

“Of Aunties and Elephants – Kureishi's aesthetics of Postethnicity” constitutes Chapter 4 of Part II. In this chapter the concept of ‘postethnicity’ is the focus. Stein sets out by referring to the sculptor Said Adrus, an artist with Indian, Ugandan and Swiss affiliations, and one of his art works exhibited in a gallery in London. The exhibition was called *It Ain't Ethnic*. What is ethnic art then? Has it got to do with the artist's ‘ethnicity’ in the first place? Is it the provenance of the materials used that clarify whether art be classified as ‘ethnic’ or something else? Are aesthetic properties crucial? It is against this background that Stein looks at the reception of the artist Chris Ofili, throws light upon the workings of art establishment, reads a selection of Hanif Kureishi's bildungs-literature, in particular, ›My Beautiful Laundrette‹ (1985), ›The Buddha of Suburbia‹ (1990), ›The Black Album‹ (1995), ›Intimacy‹ (1998), and his film ›London Kills Me‹ – as postethnic texts. The theoretical framework is provided by a critical engagement with the

Berkeley historian David Hollinger's concept of 'postethnicity' explicated in ›Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism‹ (1995). For Stein, these texts are postethnic texts, because they show an awareness of the expectations that so-called ethnic writing faces and because they actually go beyond these expectations. Interestingly, postethnic then, as Stein shows, in no way transcends the 'ethnic', rather it disputes the confinements of the very category (cf. 112). Stein adapts Hollinger's concept to suggest that neither history nor biology constitute a primary basis for the fashioning of affiliations (cf. 113). The label 'postethnic' for Kureishi's texts indicates the writer's "play between external ascriptions and active affiliations, and the assumption that ethnicity is partly chosen" (113). Stein's analyses of Kureishi's texts are to the point: Kureishi's characters cannot be placed exclusively within one type of formation, be it an ethnic or cultural group, or a class. Instead, they freely move within divergent groups, pose ethnicity, – though not without irony – , and most importantly, they seek affiliations, which, to follow Stein's postethnic argumentation, are forged, they are made and appreciated as provisional. The characters actively seek affiliations instead of inheriting them or obeying ascriptions in spite of external pressure exerted on them. Without discarding ethnicity, its essentialist character is undermined by Kureishi's post- and posed-ethnic texts. 'Englishness' is questioned and opened up, rendered penetrable and also penetrated by his characters. Stein concludes this chapter by foregrounding that Kureishi's aesthetics of postethnicity compels the reader to also (re-)consider his or her own position.

The last chapter is entitled "Amorphous Connections – Post-colonial Intertextuality". Stein sets out to discuss the representation of British imperial and naval history by focussing on a recipe for an "Empire Christmas Pudding" in the Wolfson Gallery of Trade and Empire at the National Maritime Museum. Stein offers a multiplicity of possible readings of this recipe, maintaining that an artifact which was originally meant to celebrate Empire yields itself to conflicting, contested readings. This example is perfectly linked to further issues that Stein raises in this chapter: first, historiography in a heterogeneous society and second, what Stein calls an "unfixing of the discourse of empire, opening it up, and interpreting its history and its current efficacy" (144). Stein highlights what has become commonplace in postmodern and poststructuralist discourse: there is no one single referent to the signifier history. Rather, Stein emphasises that there is a plurality of narratives which seek to adequately represent the mutually entangled histories of those who make up (modern) Britain. This leads him to investigate the use of the book as an emblem of colonial power, based on Bhabha's essay "Signs Taken for Wonders". The remaining part of this chapter is devoted to a "logovorous" (150ff.) reading of Dabydeen's novel ›The Intended‹ (1992). By logovorous reading Stein means a "reading which constitutes a "space clearing" in the archives of an exclusive tradition" (156) and which also means reaching into other texts. ›The Intended‹ ingests pretexts and therefore recycles them. Destruction and circulation go hand in hand. ›The Intended‹ "digests" (156) other texts, specifically, Joseph Conrad's ›Heart of Darkness‹, and in effect rewrites it. Stein's conclusion to this chapter is that the protagonist of Dabydeen's bildungsroman, by producing an intertextual narrative, creates a space for himself and consequently registers his presence. Sitting in the Bodleian Library, the narrator 'digests' some of the texts, transforms them in order to counter elision and significantly, writes texts himself. He not only contributes to the library's collection, he also contributes to the English literary canon, opening it up, digesting it, transforming it, and adding to it also.

The Conclusion to the book is not a conventional conclusion in the sense of summing up the results of his multifaceted study. Of course, Stein elegantly does that but he does something else as well; he adds another characteristic feature of the black British novel of transformation to his findings: that is, finding a voice and inserting a narrative in(to) the black British novel of transformation. Voices contribute to polyphony, to a heterogenization of stories told in British texts, and in British culture(s). Voice is not only the outcome of a process of transformation but, equally important, or more important even, voice points to agency and to the creation of agency.

The last pages of Stein's book deal with the modes of marketing black British literature. Apparently there is a tendency to focus exclusively on novels at the expense of other literary genres. His observation that texts and entire genres that do not "stand at the hub of the hype" (xviii) risk being marginalized is more than apt. So we can only hope that we will see studies on black British poetry and black British drama that are as sensitive, alert and adventurous as Stein's book on the black British novel of transformation.

Stein's book would be of value to anyone interested not only in the black British novels of transformation but equally so to all those interested in the highly topical issues of processes and consequences of migration, diaspora, intercultural exchange, hybridity, cultural identity and living in between cultures.

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