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### Exposing Dual Oddities In E.R.Braithwaite's *To Sir, With Love*

#### Abstract

Literature drawn from the real life experiences enhances knowledge about the difficulties undergone by different people in different places. Literature thus serves as a tool connecting people all across the world. Literature has always engaged in recreating events from the past. It makes the unfamiliar things familiar to the readers. It is capable of foreseeing events and draws the readers into another world that is unfamiliar to the reader. The reader unintentionally gets haunted into the world created by the writer. Literature by making use of the complex psyche of the characters probes into the minds of the readers. Here E.R. Braithwaite with his semi- autobiographical novel, *To Sir, With Love* probes into the minds of readers by dealing with his real life experiences. The paper focuses on the racial prejudices that existed in London along with analysing the difficulties that the protagonist had to face and how he succeeds later on winning the affection and respect from his students.

Keywords: Racial prejudices, discrimination, colour, oddities

Literature is the best expression of the best thought reduced to writing. These thoughts acquire more perfection when they are produced out of real life experiences. Literature by dealing with the complex psyche of the characters is capable of portraying the different phases of life. This helps one to perceive life from different dimensions. It widens one's thought and makes one capable of undergoing critical situations in life with ease. Literature thus by portraying real life helps one to associate one's feelings with others. Hence it serves as a vehicle of expressing ideas, thoughts, emotions and feelings.

Edward Ricardo Braithwaite, one of the most celebrated authors of Guyana was born in 1912 in Georgetown, British Guiana. Apart from being a writer he is also a teacher, social worker and a diplomat. He is best known for his debut book, *To Sir, With Love* (1959) which plots out the author's real life experience in post-war Britain. He has also written several other works of fiction that mainly dealt with the themes of racial discrimination and inequality in early Britain and his memoirs include *Paid Servant* (1962) which dealt with the immigrants' life and *Honorary White* (1975) discusses his disgust on racial segregation.

*To Sir, With Love*, a semi-autobiographical novel by Braithwaite captures an era, focusing on the realities of racial discrimination and disillusionment of colored people in 1950s Britain. It narrates the life of the protagonist, Ricky Braithwaite, a Guyanese teacher in an East End School who transforms a class of unruly and disobedient working class children and falls in love with a white teacher. The novel set in the East End of London where the racial prejudices and tensions stood at its peak. The place is notorious for its extreme poverty and social problems associated with it. Even though it is undergoing changes, some parts of the East End continue to face the worst kind of poverty in Britain.

The novel gives us an insight into the racial injustices that was prevalent in the post-war London. Braithwaite being a civilized and educated man was mainly rejected for the colour of his skin. Despite his educational qualification, he was not able to find a job because of the racial discrimination that existed in Britain. Even after attaining a Master degree in Physics from Cambridge, he was rejected in most of his interviews only because of the colour of his skin. The authorities thought that if he was appointed he would have the authority over many white employees and this would affect the rapport of the organisation with the workers. They could not tolerate a black man controlling the white people. Thus beyond his educational calibre what mattered was the color of his skin. It was after his 18 months of unemployment and lack of confidence that he decides to try teaching. Even though he succeeds in the interview, he was posted in the worst schools in the East End of London. He was constantly bullied by his students in the classroom.

The novel by making use of the first person narrative makes the reader directly come across the harsh reality that the protagonist had to face. When the novel commences Mr. Richard Braithwaite is heading to Greenslade School where he gets appointed. He is riding in a double-decker bus, where a lady with a little boy, obviously of an upper class shows hesitation to sit near him only because he is black. Even he tries to forget and ignore the colour of his skin; he was made to come to face to face with it. The novel frequently uses the words 'black' and 'white' like 'white T-shirt', 'dirtied black', 'white card', 'tanned or olive-skinned', 'white hair' and so on in order to reveal how the differences in color mattered so much.

When he reaches London he was stuck by the disparities between his expectation of the place and reality he had to meet. He had dreamed of a London that was romantic in classical and contemporary writings. In his expectation he was eager to visit a place that was ideally constructed by Chaucer and Erasmus. But what welcomed him was a dark and

gloomy building located in a bomb-wrecked area, which he compares unfavourably with his schoolhouse in Georgetown, where he was born. The school here itself seemed to be a forbidden place, a dirty structure. Here he finds the real color of London brooding gloom as a result of the wars. He did not find anything romantic instead it was untidy and noisy. He felt sick and discomfort when he walked through the streets. It was filled with multiracial folks who were busy with their own business. They did not care for each other.

When he joins the school he finds it hard to cop up with the students who were violent, they used obscene language and were rude to each other. In an instance a girl sets her sanitary napkin on fire in the classroom, which upsets Braithwaite. Even though they were whites, they were victims of the damp, impoverished, uncivilized, and overpopulated and poverty stricken conditions at home. There Braithwaite finds the distinction between the haves and have-nots. He understood that their rude behaviour was a result of their social conditions as they felt unsecured. Later on he decides to handle the kids like adults where girls are addressed as 'Miss' and the boys by their surnames. Thereafter he gets connected with the class. Thus Braithwaite's fair treatment to the students changes their outlook to others.

For Braithwaite, life in London was of double oddities; first for the colour of his skin and for his class. People over there are tainted with hateful virus of race and class that attacks their vision thereby distorting everything. In an instance, compassion overlaps racism when a mixed-race student's mother dies. Braithwaite arranges for the class to send a wreath to the family but none of the children were ready to deliver it because they can't be seen going to a 'coloured person's home' (169). The children are friendly to the boy Seales, who 'was born among them, grew up among them, played with them' (169) but they were not ready to break the social taboos constructed by the society. But breaking the taboos later on convinced by

their teacher Braithwaite the pupils attend the funeral of Seales mother. This encourages Braithwaite to remain more dedicated to his students irrespective of his color.

In an instance, Braithwaite insist to Seales, one of his students, a mixed race boy when he was about to attack a bullying sports teacher that 'always to be a bit bigger than the people who hurt you' (162). He always advised his students to be kind enough to accept others. This is how he acts throughout the novel; he stood calm and silent and was against rebellion.

In another instance the mother of one of the girls in the class comes in to complain about her daughter's bad behaviour. The girl, Pamela, confides in her teacher: she is upset about the men who have developed a relationship with her widowed mother which she believes. Again the narrator warns against rebellion and insists that Pamela should be an obedient and 'courteous' daughter. His message to the children seems to be: the world will do its dirty job; there's no use kicking against the pricks; try to maintain your dignity; that's the best you can hope for. He changes the impolite atmosphere of the class by engaging in frequent discussions about everything possible. He thus replaces hatred and disillusionment with love.

There are several instances in the novel where Braithwaite gets publicly humiliated because of his colour. As in the bus when an Englishwoman refuses to sit next to him. In another occasion while taking his pupils to the Victoria and Albert Museum, two elderly well-dressed women states 'shameless young girls and these black men' (91) until one of the pupils, Pamela, shouts at them: "He is our teacher, do you mind?" (91) Again, Ricky is silent and so maintains his dignity.

In the middle of the novel, Ricky and Gillian strike up a friendship in the staffroom which gradually develops into a romance. The main obstacle seems to be his worry about the effect of a racist society on her. Their main concern was what the society might think. Gillian

always wished that he would always stand up to the racist. Once they decide to marry they have to overcome her father's unwillingness to grant his consent. He objects: "You might have children; what happens to them? They'll belong nowhere, and nobody will want them" (178). When racists were not complaining that the black men were 'taking our women' they pretended to be concerned for the mixed-race children who, they argued, would not know who they were. Braithwaite assures Gillian's father that their children "will belong to us and we will want them" (179). But he also prefaces this article of faith by saying "If Gillian and I marry" (179).

At the end of the novel Braithwaite spells out his philosophy:

"I made it clear that it was also true that coloured people in England were gradually working for their own salvation, realizing that it was not enough for them to complain about injustices done to them, or rely on other interested parties to agitate on their behalf. They were working to show their worth, integrity and dignity in spite of the forces opposed to them." (182)

The novel ends in a positive note by giving a ray of hope against all ills. He teaches us that by keeping one's dignity without expecting anything from others, it is possible to make changes in the society. Braithwaite faces all adversities with courage and builds up a space of his own. Standing alone he was able to change the attitude of others instead of changing himself.

Braithwaite in spite of all the torments from the students was able to enlighten them with his inner strength and the color of the skin hardly mattered. The students hated the teacher only because he was black. They treated him with contempt. But it was this black man who civilised those savage students. It was he who taught them the basic courtesies. Here black which was treated as a mark of inferiority was thus overthrown by him. His students started identifying each other as humans irrespective of their color, caste and creed. The Oddity here thus refers to his color that distinguished him from others. As a black man

he had to fight many rampant battles in his life. He had to work harder and study more than the whites in order to be recognised. He felt like the color of his skin grabbed his identity as it grabbed his opportunities for a better life. By keeping his dignity inside his black skin he was able to get rid of all the oddities in life.

The novel thus can be viewed as a triumph over adversity. Even though he cannot uproot the prejudice, he could point out his existence thereby breaking the barriers of racial prejudice. The novel teaches us irrespective of the color how one's determination and dedication to one's own true self can bring changes in others. Thus his experience as a teacher sets the beginning of change by standing against all adversities and establishing an identity of his own.

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