

**POLITICAL, CULTURAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICTS OF THE IMMIGRANTS: A
STUDY OF MICHELLE CLIFF'S *INTO THE INTERIOR***

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Abstract

This article examines how Anglophone Caribbean woman writers' depictions of female immigration to the city link to and eventually rework the 1950s "boom generation's" macho literary legacy. This research paper concentrates on Michelle Cliff's novel *Into the Interior* (2010), which depicts London as a succession of theatrical scenarios witnessed by a West Indian lady with political conflicts and cultural and psychological distance. This reading lets us remark *Into the Interior's* link with Anglophone Caribbean male literary heritage and Cliff's political and aesthetic ideas.

Key Words: boom generation, politics, culture, conflict, psychology

Introduction

Michelle Cliff's *Into the Interior*, published over a century after Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*, explores the topic of female migration to the colonial city from a contemporary viewpoint. Set in the second half of the twentieth century, the book traces the travels of an anonymous, bisexual West Indian lady from Jamaica to New York to London. The opening chapters are set in Jamaica and rebuild the protagonist's infancy and early youth in a broken and diffuse fashion, blending past and present to make a shaky narrative thread. The narrator's youth is defined by abandonment and loneliness, even though she is from a wealthy plantation family:

The last thing in the world my mother wanted was a child. Worse: this was a daughter. Her husband, my father, as it happened, made it clear: If it's not a boy, don't bother bringing it home. Don't even think about it, you hear. This would pass, of course. And his remarks would pass as a family joke. But the point had been made. Say no more. . . . I grew up to be someone adept at leaving. (*Into the Interior* 12, 15)

Her father is on his yacht, "impaling a local beauty" on the day of her birth, while her mother is in the hospital (13). She is reared on the North Coast in her great-plantation grandmother's period mansion, where she spends more time with the black servant Winona than with her parents. Her mother dies unexpectedly when she is twelve, an occurrence she interprets as "a final absence; she who had never been present" (16). Later, she discovers that her mother died of a failed abortion in Haiti, which her father did nothing to prevent. Her namelessness is crucial because, on the one hand, it denotes her refusal to pronounce the name her parents gave her, and on the other, it denotes her disdain of labels and easy classification. Alone and in her "motherless state," she moves to New York for college, which her father dismisses as a "high-priced bordello" (17), and then to London, fleeing not only her family's troubled colonial past and her father's excesses but also

her growing awareness of homophobia in both her native island and the northern region, where female sexual dissidents are avulsed with razors in college bathrooms. As a result, London serves as her incognito haven: "I'm here, and no one knows where I am" (29). She seeks graduate courses in art history as a method to escape, though briefly, the present: "I hid away in an institute of advanced learning whose speciality is the visual arts, awash in nudes and ambiguity . . . Everything is red and gold and lapis. So comforting, all this colour, evidence of grandeur" (29). As the title indicates, the protagonist tries to escape persecution and injustice by withdrawing into the inner side of her psyche. She replaces Nanny and Cudjoe's fleeing about colonies with London and travels alone.

In the London chapters, time is less crucial than reconstructing settings and circumstances in which the protagonist is a distant observer. The London part of the story covers the protagonist's encounters with eccentric intellectuals: Jennifer, a talented Institute student; Michael, the narrator's girlfriend, a white South African photographer dedicated to the anti-apartheid cause; Morag, a Scottish lady who also studies at the Institute; the authors Richard and Caroline, and the latter's public double, Bertie; the nudist pair Rex, an ex-surgeon, and his companion Queenie; and the trio of Buddy, a US American expatriate, his English wife Eliza. All of these personalities and settings are affiliated with the English intellectual elite, a fictitious world of professors, artists, authors, and researchers who occupy the British Museum, Tate Gallery, London publishing firms, and an unidentified university.

She moves below and inside as a freelance journalist, interviewing the mysterious "penis chamber" custodian in the British Museum basement or Richard and Caroline's dining room on behalf of the publishing business that promotes them to obtain a "closer look. This viewpoint gives a critical image of the British publishing sector, which seems far less imaginative and devoted than the BBC, as described by writers such as Lamming, Selvon, Naipaul, and Mittelholzer in their literary memoirs. In *Into the Interior*, the fundamental goals of the cultural business are solely commercial, and its techniques are concentrated upon not just the advertising and selling of books but also the production of celebrity-like writers who crank out one page-turner after another.

These feelings of distrust and disappointment in modern publishing organisations, we believe, represent Cliff's position as a writer who is reluctant to bow down before the business logic of publishing. Despite the success of her previous books *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, in a recent interview, Cliff talks about the challenge of finding a publishing firm courageous enough to accept *Into the Interior*, a work far less accessible and more experimental than her earlier novels ("Michelle Cliff: The Historical Re-Visionary" 1). Cultural politics and the link between the artist and the industry are unquestionably a major issue in her current work, as reflected in the contrast of politically driven art by Catherine Lyle and Michael with characters like Richard and Caroline, whose ostensibly progressive creative attitude, in reality, reproduces behaviours and relationships that are very similar to the patriarchal cultures from which the narrator originates.

By being more bewildered by the dishonest lifestyles of her companions, the narrator's inner movement is accompanied by an outside movement. Bart, outwardly scholarly and sophisticated, in actuality, abuses his wife Imogen in the solitude of their yacht; Imogen, like the protagonist's mother, is mute, expressing only her love for her husband; Richard's queerness reveals itself as a "taste" for young boys; Although Rex seems to be forward-thinking, his medical cooperation with the Nazis and Queenie's deafening silence belie this apparent advancement. And Buddy's familial history of incest and rape, coupled with Elizabeth and Isabel's

supposed sexual connection (and Isabel's industrial strength vibrator), emerges as a borderline real, borderline fantasy group of urban characters uncanny and odd in the narrator's words.

In an earlier episode of the series, she accepted Rex and Queenie's offer to visit their stone house on the Isle of Jersey. Paying no attention to their past and the premise of the invitation (which is assumed to be sexual), the narrator travels the island with Queenie, noting not just meadows of cows and Neolithic graves but also Nazi bunkers and a hospital cut out of the rock where Rex worked during the German occupation. Upon being pressed by the protagonist for information about Rex's work at the facility, Queenie is keen to hide her partner's grisly history of human dissection and experimentation. When the narrator finally understands what she has walked into, she quickly chooses to take leave, "feeling strange, uneasy. The whimsical, the unusual vanished" (*Into the Interior* 82). As with the previous vignettes, this one concludes with a retreat: "I left them to themselves" (71) she states at the end of the chapter in which she visits Richard's home: "I begged off" (99) is her closing line of "The Joy of Cooking." The protagonist remains on the outside margins, reflected in her positioning as she travels in the underground, doubly distanced from her metropolitan surroundings by her dark glasses and the subway's glass doors:

In my mind's eye, there is a glass divider. On one side of this clear wall, two women are shouting. Their arms move wildly. Their mouths are agape. I can hear nothing but the sound of the train. I think I recognise one of these women. I cannot tell you her name, even now. *I am stuck in a car on the Underground watching an alternative theatre.* I cannot take my eyes off the two women, one of whom I barely know. I am wearing dark glasses . . . (38)

The narrator's place regarding the individuals she watches in London is exemplified by the components that converge in this scene: the Underground, the sound of the train, the glass that divides the narrator from the ladies she observes, her dark, isolating spectacles, and the allusion to the theatre. How can we place *Into the Interior's* collection of experiences represented as a succession of theatrical settings with people with unusual names and even crazier behaviours in the context of the tale of a woman who yearns to belong and commit but constantly withdraws? Furthermore, how can we read Cliff's creative trajectory as a self-identified political writer connected to the artistically oriented people in *Into the Interior*, whose alternate lives and deviant sexual practises are perverted and detestable? One answer may be found in the protagonist's initial connection, that of her father and mother, since it sets the tone for the following interactions she will see, many of which tend to duplicate her parents' dominance, power, and subjection dynamic. In addition to her upbringing as an unwanted kid moved from one person to another, her early isolation from her community foreshadows adult experiences of fleeting meetings and fractured communication.

Into the Interior, like Michelle Cliff's previous works, places its heroine in familial and societal situations comparable to those the author has experienced, generating feelings of alienation from her family and Jamaican culture. *Into the Interior*, however, differs from Cliff's earlier novels in that its protagonist seems unable to overcome her sense of isolation, in contrast to *No Telephone to Heaven's* Clare Savage and *Free Enterprise's* Annie Christmas. They seem to do so by building alternative relationships of affiliation. (*The World, the Text and the Critic* 31-53). Although *Into the Interior* ends with a suggestion of this alternative, it is hazy and confusing at best. Regarding her adult relationships, the protagonist's early childhood experience of separation and loneliness manifests itself in her tendency to act as an observer in Oedipal-style triangles and her reluctance to develop closer attachments with individuals she meets later in life.

Into the Interior is Cliff's sole novel in which the narrator is not identified as the protagonist (until in the book's last pages), making it more difficult to distinguish between the text's ideology and the narrator's point of view/protagonist. In this sense, there is a substantial contrast between Cliff's first book, *Abeng* a work in which the third-person narrator constantly supplies signals about how to understand and assess Clare's conduct and the social milieu she inhabits and *Into the Interior*, where the similarities between the author's life and the protagonist's trajectory lead us to read the narrative voice as identical with Cliff's authorial awareness. On a textual level, however, multiple markings imply their detachment, as shown by the narrator's scepticism of the storytellers' reliability, both in respect to her family "Not a reliable narrator in the crew" (*Into the Interior* 3) and about herself, as articulated in the opening words of "Runagate": "You'll have to take my word that some of these things happened" (103). The narrator's undermining of her narrative authority, adds to the perception of reality and the theatrical portrayal seen in many of the novel's episodes.

The link between the protagonist's self-isolation and her reluctance to commit to individuals or political causes, as well as the frequent appearance of women, who commit suicide to escape severe conditions of isolation, prejudice, and detachment, reveals the essential gap between Cliff's authorial awareness and the narrative voice. The narrator reconstructs the biography of Catherine Lyle, the African American militant, in one of the novel's last vignettes, indicating that her political engagement stems from the death of another Black student at her boarding school. Catherine Lyle's guilt stems from her failure to reach out to her classmate as she watched her sleepwalk night after night. Simone Weil, a woman who let herself die in sympathy with the Jews during WWII, and her question "What are you going through?" are at the heart of her guilt (106). Also significant is the protagonist's obsession with *Hedda Gabbler*, the intertextual references to Virginia Woolf's texts, and explicit scenes of female suicide, all of which resonate with *Into the Interior*'s final scene when the protagonist follows a phantom-like, French revolutionary era woman *Into the Interior* of the Thames.

The hermetic conclusion of the novel and the neologism with which it ends "Apocalypse", a play between apocalypse and Calypso ("Michelle Cliff: The Historical Re-Visionary" 1) can be read as suicide but also as a reencounter with the transformative forces of language and nature, reminding readers of Clare Savage's death in the final scene of *No Telephone to Heaven*. There, the failure of the guerrilla attack on the US-American film set results in the protagonist's death, but it also represents her reintegration with her native Jamaican land and the play of language (*Making Men* 136). The protagonist's final path in *Into the Interior* can also be read from this double perspective: both as a suicide whose underwater immersion reunites the protagonist with women, revolution, and language, or as a final decision to withdraw from her explorations "*Into the Interior*" of a transgressive London that hides neurotic patterns of submission and domination. Escaping the theatrical nature of her metropolitan existence, she seeks to belong through a final act of detachment: submerging herself into a dreamlike river in search of her one true mother: language.

Conclusion

What distinguishes *Into the Interior* is the protagonist's acute sense of detachment. In Jamaica, she has no community to return to since she lacks links to both her family and Jamaica's popular classes (as seen by the young protagonist's attempt to participate in religious rites at her school's gardener's church, where she ends up humiliated in front of the Afro-Jamaican congregation). She cannot build true connections in London, where she is isolated from individuals who share her interest in art, her sexual orientation, and anti-colonial

and anti-racism movements. Is this the protagonist's means of proving that neither Caribbean anti-colonial (male) literature nor London's subculture provides her freedom and creativity? Cliff's newest work demystifies the Anglophone "boom" generation's depiction of London as a literary and Antillean communal hub. *Into the Interior's* experimental language and structure symbolise Cliff's endeavour to develop a new political aesthetic that portrays the complexity of West Indian immigrant experiences and the huge obstacles colonial subjects encounter as they confront urban alienation and try to construct individual and communal programmes of socio-cultural change.

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