



Quest for National Past, Culture & Identity in Michelle Cliff's Fiction

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Among the Jamaican writers, Michelle Cliff towers high. She explores in her fiction the theme of ancestry [National Past], Culture and Identity of the characters. She also shows the impact of colonization on the Caribbean, the relationships among and the interconnection of African people in the diaspora, racism and the often erroneous way in which the history of black people is imprinted. In her latest novel, *Free Enterprise* [1993], she attempts to rewrite the story of Mary Ellen Pleasant, the African American woman who supplied money with which John Brown bought arms for the raid at Harper's Ferry. Her other two novels, *No Telephone to Heaven* [1987] and *Abeng* [1984] are semi-autobiographical and explore the life of Clare Savage, a fair-skinned girl raised between Jamaica and North America, who must reconcile her mixed heritage in a changing society. Other works Cliff comprise *Bodies of Water* [1990], *The Land of Look Behind* [1985], and *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* [1980].

Notable novelist, poet and essayist, Michelle Cliff has spent the past decade and a half creating a body of resistance literature that describes and formally enacts the struggle for cultural decolonization. Originally from Jamaica, Cliff was educated in Jamaica, the United States, and England. She has written repeatedly of her struggle to claim her voice. As a light-skinned daughter of Colonialism, Cliff was raised to reject her 'colored' heritage, but after completing a dissertation on the Italian renaissance at the University of London, she began a sustained examination of the Anglocentric education she had received. Thus, her career as a writer began as a process of trying to reclaim the self through memory, dreams and history.

Cliff's first book was followed by *The Land of Look Behind* [1985], a collection of poems and essays that includes selections from *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* and the novels *Abeng* [1984] and *No Telephone to Heaven* [1987]. Together these novels chronicle a young woman's quest for the suppressed history of Jamaica and the process by which she comes to commit herself to anticolonialist politics. More recently, she published a collection of short fiction, *Bodies of Water* [1990], and a new novel, *Free Enterprise* [1993]. Building on historical records of Mary Ellen Pleasant, who funded and helped plan the enterprise that came to be known as John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, *Free Enterprise* imaginatively recovers stories of the centuries-long resistance to the slave trade, centering on women who devoted to their lives to the cause. Cliff's essays, short stories, and poems have appeared in numerous periodicals and anthologies, including *Critical Fictions*, *Voice Literary Supplement*, *Ms.*, *Caribbean Women Writers*, *New Worlds of Literature*, *American Voice*, *I-Kon*, *Frontiers*, and *Heresies*. Set in the United States, the Caribbean, and England, Cliff's work reflects her own experience of diaspora while representing a wide range of imperialism's manifestations and effects. Her texts explore the ways in which colonialism's racist ideology interests with a variety of oppressive ideological systems, including those based on class, gender and sexual orientation.



Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* is a novel related to Maroons, published in 1984. It is a semi-fictional autobiographical novel about a mixed-race Jamaican girl named Clare Savage growing up in the 1950s. As Clare tries to find her own identity and place in her culture, she carries the burden of her mixed heritage. There are the Maroons, who used the conch shell – the Abeng – to pass messages as they fought against their English enslavers. And there is her white great-great-grandfather, Judge Savage, who burned his hundred slaves on the eve of their emancipation.

Truly to speak, 'Abeng' means an animal horn or musical instrument in the Twi language of the Akan people of Ghana. The Abeng has had two historical uses in Jamaica. It was used by slaveholders to summon slaves to the sugar fields. It was also used by the Maroon army as a method of communication. In a recent lecture at the University of St. Thomas, Cliff said that the title was a reference to both of these uses, though neither appears in the novel's text. They are referenced in the book's foreword. She further explained that the title is an attempt to 'take back' Jamaican history.

It finds out the historical repression resulting from British imperialism in Jamaica. Facts regarding imperialism of the island are dispersed throughout the narrative, as well as facts about slavery in Jamaica and Jamaican folklore. It is emphasized that the protagonists are generally unaware of these facts, which often serve to reveal the brutal nature of both slavery and imperialism. In this way Cliff reveals her intentions for the book. It is a piece of revisionist literature meant to challenge the mainstream narrative of Jamaican history. The novel also talks about the white woman as incredibly horrible. Mrs. Stevens is almost an exact description of a woman. She was a woman who was absolutely filthy. She would not wash it. Finally, she got sick and they took her to the hospital and washed her. As soon as the water hit her skin, she dropped dead. She had convinced herself, she was unclean.

The environmental devastation of the land exemplified in the destruction of primeval forests for agriculture and the subsequent abandonment of these areas both point to the 'ruinate', catastrophic effects of development on the environment of the Caribbean. This 'ruinate' vegetation illustrates how the telos of progress is often decayed. As Clare Savage's interviewer tells her before accepting her into their revolutionary group –

"If you have been here for the past two years, then you realize that all progress is backwards."

Clare Savage's clearing of the 'ruinate' for cultivation can be seen as an effort to regress the course of progress, at least to certain intermediate steps. Her continuation of her grandmother's and mother's tradition of freely distributing the surplus agricultural products of their land to the less wealthy can be seen as yet another attempt to undo progress and return to earlier, more communal ways of living in harmony with fellow humans and nature.

However, Cliff's appraisal of development becomes more complicated as it suggests the utilization of development as an antidote to itself. The severe nature of this homeopathic solution is obvious in the guerrilla activities of the group. The requirement to finish the present economic inequality of the island, its ecological devastation, and all the other ills resulting from development practices are combated by the guerrilla with the same intense developmental, revolutionary impulses.

Within the context of the family, Clare's fair complexion unites her to her father and separates her from her darker mother and sister who, unable to tolerate America's racism and the assimilationist tendencies of Boy, split the family when they return to Jamaica. Clare's light skin produces and emblemizes a deep sense of in-betweenness which drives her to seek a more coherent sense of self through identification with place. The denigrating epithets, she endures – 'white cockroach' – and her British colonial education result in a deep dissatisfaction with the U.S. and drive her to London [153]. Unable to fully find herself in her



education at the University of London or around the colonial center, Clare decides to begin her life in Jamaica after a family calls her there –

“I returned to Jamaica” “to mend to bury my mother
... I returned to this island because there was nowhere else ... I
could live no longer in borrowed countries, on borrowed time.”

No Telephone to Heaven is a brilliant Jamaican-American writer takes on the themes of colonialism, race, myth, and political awakening through the experiences of a light-skinned woman named Clare Savage. The story is one of discovery as Clare moves through a variety of settings – Jamaica, England, America – and encounters people who affect her search for place and self.

Both the action of the narrative and the journey of transformation of its central characters [Clare and Charles] are defined and motivated by experiences of racism - specifically, the negative attitudes of whites towards blacks, and the resulting internalization of those attitudes by blacks towards themselves. There is the sense throughout the book that the author is portraying Jamaica, with all its economic and social troubles, as having gotten to that place as a result of systematic and lasting exploitation by whites. Then, when Boy Savage emigrates with his family from Jamaica to America, it is with the hope that the so-called American Dream of freedom and equality for all will extend to his race.

In New York, Boy continues to try to assume a white identity. He finds a job driving a laundry truck, while Clare's mother, Kitty, darker-skinned than her husband, works in the laundry office. Kitty becomes frustrated by the racism she observes every day. She begins to slip anti-racism messages into white customers' linens, like “Marcus Garvey was right” and “Consider kindness for a change”. Kitty's boss finds out about the messages but suspects two other black workers and fires them. Kitty quits and goes back to Jamaica, taking Clare's darker-skinned little sister Jennie with her. The lighter-skinned Clare and her father remain.

Clare becomes isolated, watching movies alone at home. She thinks back on the first American woman she ever met, a white teacher she encountered back in Jamaica who considered the movie *Gone with the Wind* a documentary. The School begins, and Clare is told that despite her intelligence, she will be held back a year because she is from an underprivileged Third World country. Boy tries to tell school authorities that Clare is white, but they are not convinced. They also have no category for biracial or mixed-race students: Clare must be classified as either black or white, and they decide she is black.

Truly, his ongoing denigration of local blacks is grounded in his simultaneous conviction of their innate inferiority, and in these terms, the privations of slavery and its aftermath were what they deserved. Cliff's exposure of the harsh realities of emancipation, and the ways in which it had driven the later social structure of Jamaica, is lost on them –

“There was no cash compensation for the people who had
laboured under slavery. No tracts of land for them to farm. No
employment for the most part. No literacy programs. No money
to books passage back to Africa. Their enslavement had
become an inconvenience – and now it was removed.”

The critical combination of contemporary denial and falsity had its roots in an unconscionable act of barbarity and sadism that would continue to haunt the familial tensions of the Savages.

There is a tension aroused by the ambiguous family tree of Clare's mother, Kitty Freeman. The outcome of a series of ethnic and generational intersections paradoxically imprinted the continuous prevalence of the slave past in Jamaica's presence. Kitty's origins form a symbolic counter to those of Boy in their lacks of racial rootedness:



“Kitty’s mother was both Black and white, and her father’s origins were unknown ... Her people were called ‘red’ and they knew that this was what they were a settling of blood as some lighter skins crossed over one or other of the darker ones – keeping guard, though, over a base of darkness.”

While Kitty herself serves as a constant physical reminder of the ways in which slavery’s sexual depredations produced varied patterns of racial *metissage*, the underlying paradox of white racial superiority is maintained and extended through Boy’s insistence on his and Clare’s intrinsic and inescapable whiteness, itself both a multivalent contradiction in terms, as we shall see, and one that ultimately catalyzes Clare’s revolt, as she interrogates and stresses her sexual, social and historical identity.

The Caribbean Literature inculcates the historical issues of enslavement and forced migration, the related themes of home and exile, colonialism and decolonization. It also embraces the social and cultural themes of tradition, landscape, national past, culture, community and addresses such as universal questions as identity, sexuality, family life, pain, joy and the uses of imagination. The present study seeks to study the theme of history, cultural heritage, quest for National Past and identity in the selected works of Erna Brodber and Michelle Cliff. Actually, the issues of history, cultural heritage, national past, culture and identity are more dominant not only in the works of Erna Brodber and Michelle Cliff, but also in the entire works of Caribbean Literature. Especially, the themes like history, culture and identity are more intense in the fictions of both these writers and they deserve a detailed study. To start with, Erna Brodber was born at Woodside, St. Mary, Jamaica in 1940. Her major novels comprise *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* [1980], *Myal* [1988] and *Louisiana* [1994]. Michelle Cliff was born in Jamaica in 1946. Her major novel include *Abeng* [1984], *No Telephone to Heaven* [1987] and *Free Enterprise* [1993]. All these above mentioned novels are discussed in detail in the previous chapters in relation to the themes of history, cultural heritage, quest for national past, culture and identity.

Michelle Cliff’s significant novel, *Abeng* was published in 1984. Cliff posits the examination of a child’s attempt to cope with opposing values by looking closely at the chaos caused when the past history of Jamaica is withheld from the individual and the collective. There is a fair-skinned 12-year-old Clare, a privileged elite, as she tries to pull together all of the puzzling parts of her identity and history. Out of a burning curiosity, she has to relearn the history of White, Black and Red people in Jamaica. It has been clouded in ignorance and silence. First, both her mother and her father deliberately keep silence and leave gaps in their historical recitations. Secondly, the prestigious colonial education she receives totally ignores all but the former British slave owners’ and colonials’ contributions to Jamaican history.

In *Abeng*, Cliff repeatedly exerts a third-person narrative attitude. This attitude remains more and more fragmented. However, it is achieved through the narrator’s continual juxtaposition within and between the historical commentaries on the Jamaican present and past in relation to the individual [Clare Savage] and the collective [the Maroons, the Savages, and the Freemans]. From the opening page of the novel, Cliff establishes this mixture of the historical past and present by relating the story of Nanny the Maroon and connecting it to the Savage family’s current existence. It takes to a preoccupation with a thematic issue of the split consciousness. This is so because Clare’s parents are representative of the societal split. James Arthur ‘Boy’ Savage, Clare’s father, represents White colonial power and insists that Clare is White. Kitty Freeman Savage, Clare’s mother, is the Red representative of silence and emotional distance and accepts that Clare belongs to her father.



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