

# The ART of DAVID DABYDEEN



We mark your memory  
in songs  
Fleshed in the emptiness  
of folk,  
Poems that scrape  
bowl and bone  
In English basements  
far from home  
Or confess the lust of beasts  
In rare conceits  
To congregations of  
the educated  
Sipping wine, attentive  
between courses –  
See the applause fluttering  
from their white hands  
Like so many messy  
table napkins.

David Dabydeen  
from *Coolie Odyssey*

Essays by Mark McWatt, Sarah  
Lawson Welsh, Benita Parry,  
Margery Fee, Jean Popeau, Mario  
Relich and Karen McIntyre.  
Interviews by Wolfgang Binder,  
Frank Birbalsingh and Kwame  
Dawes.

Edited by Kevin Grant



THE ART OF DAVID DABYDEEN





# **THE ART OF DAVID DABYDEEN**

**Edited by Kevin Grant**



**P E E P A L   T R E E**

First published in Great Britain in 1997  
Peepal Tree Press Ltd  
17 King's Avenue  
Leeds LS6 1QS  
England

© Kevin Grant 1997  
and individual contributors

All rights reserved  
No part of this publication may be  
reproduced or transmitted in any form  
without permission

ISBN 1 900715 10 4

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the editors of *Kunapipi*, *Ariel* and *The Journal of West Indian Literature* for permission to reprint articles by Benita Parry, Margery Fee, Frank Birbalsingh and Wolfgang Binder.



## CONTENTS

### Acknowledgements

<b>Preface</b>	9
<b>1 Mark McWatt</b> His True-True Face: Masking and Revelation in David Dabydeen's <i>Slave Song</i>	15
<b>2 Sarah Lawson Welsh</b> Experiments in Brokenness: The Creative Use of Creole in David Dabydeen's <i>Slave Song</i>	27
<b>3 Benita Parry</b> Between Creole and Cambridge English: The Poetry of David Dabydeen	47
<b>4 Margery Fee</b> Resistance and Complicity in David Dabydeen's <i>The Intended</i>	67
<b>5 Benita Parry</b> <i>The Intended</i>	89



<b>6</b>	<b>Jean Popeau</b>	
	<i>Disappearance</i>	99
<b>7</b>	<b>Mark McWatt</b>	
	“Self-Consciously Post-Colonial”: The Fiction of David Dabydeen	111
<b>8</b>	<b>Mario Relich</b>	
	A Labyrinthine Odyssey: Psychic Division in the Writings of David Dabydeen	123
<b>9</b>	<b>Karen McIntyre</b>	
	Necrophilia or Stillbirth? David Dabydeen’s <i>Turner</i> as the Embodiment of Postcolonial Creative Decolonisation	141
<b>10</b>	<b>Wolfgang Binder</b>	
	Interview with David Dabydeen	159
<b>11</b>	<b>Frank Birbalsingh</b>	
	Interview with David Dabydeen	177
<b>12</b>	<b>Kwame Dawes</b>	
	Interview with David Dabydeen	199
	<b>Bibliography</b>	223
	<b>Notes on Contributors</b>	227
	<b>Index of Names</b>	229

## PREFACE

This collection of essays is one of a series planned on contemporary British/Caribbean writers: writers born in the Caribbean but now living in Britain. It is increasingly acknowledged that these writers contribute an immense richness, variety and vitality to contemporary literatures in English, regularly winning major international prizes, from the Nobel to the Booker.

However, Black British literature is by no means a modern phenomenon. As early as the eighteenth century, slave narratives and autobiographies were published in Britain by writers such as Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, Ottobah Cugoano and Ukawsaw Gronniosaw. These writers sought to assert the humanity of the African, unrecognised by a society that largely perceived Blacks as little better than wild animals.

The majority of English literature from the seventeenth century to the present day has perpetuated this perception. As David Dabydeen himself has pointed out, "black people have been fodder for white conceptualisation." Their social and historical realities ignored or denied, Blacks have been portrayed as variously evil, foolish, savage or exotic.

The first wave of immigrant writers in the 1950s sought to dispel such notions of 'otherness'. Dabydeen has described writers such as Sam Selvon, V S Naipaul, Wilson Harris and George Lamming as "missionaries in reverse", with a duty to reveal their humanity to an ignorant British society. This Caribbean literature was more than an attempt to voice the complex cultural experiences of the immigrant. It was an act of self-definition.

David Dabydeen is one of the leading voices of the second wave of immigrant writers. Sent to England from Guyana in 1969,

in Care for three years before gaining a place at Cambridge University, he has occupied the perfect position from which to examine the plurality of the Caribbean experience. Slavery, cultural denigration, migration, dislocation and psychic division are recurring themes in his work.

More strikingly, Dabydeen is unique in being the only poet to employ Guyanese rural English in his work. Control of language is a dominant feature of imperial oppression, and only the creation of a postcolonial voice can overthrow such power. Dabydeen's startlingly innovative form shuns conventional English grammar in favour of a Creole voice infinitely more powerful in expressing the complexities of the Caribbean experience.

Dabydeen's writings differ markedly from his predecessors in that he seeks to mask rather than reveal self, and it is this process of concealment that Mark McWatt elucidates in the opening chapter on *Slave Song*. He describes Dabydeen's use of multiple masks to suggest the complexity of the West Indian identity. The poems themselves, the critical notes on each poem, the translation of each poem into Standard English, and the volume's illustrations create several alternative 'texts' which interact to simultaneously project and conceal the persona of the poet.

Sarah Lawson Welsh takes up Mark McWatt's line of analysis when she argues that *Slave Song*'s incorporation of Standard English translations and an Eurocentric critical apparatus somewhat tames the energy and radicalism of the poems. However, she goes further, suggesting that the translations and notes form an integral part of the text. Dabydeen's role as critic is just another in a series of masks.

Benita Parry's essay focuses on Dabydeen's use of Creole and Cambridge English in his search for a language that will speak the Guyanese history and landscape. His ambition to 'speak' for the historically muted is a fiction, she argues, for he must reinvent the speech and fantasies of the slaves and canecutters. *Slave Song* and *Coolie Odyssey* are ultimately rewritings of the

West's master narrative, addressing the postcolonial condition. As poetry that subverts Standard English, however, it has the capacity to alter the Eurocentric consciousness of its audience.

Margery Fee turns her attention to Dabydeen's first work of fiction, the clearly autobiographical, *The Intended*. Its theme of a young Guyanese immigrant's quest for an identity acceptable to the British establishment is undercut by the 'messiness' of the narrative structure, revealing the author's ultimate allegiance to his West Indian identity, despite his uncertain and shifting loyalties. The novel is 'folked up', argues Fee, turning the reader away from the hero's attempts to become white and towards his subsequent struggle to become black. This shift transforms the novel into a postcolonial allegory, rejecting the 'birdcage' of Standard English, clarity, order and homogenous identity in favour of the celebration of an apparently haphazard Creole and a multifaceted identity.

The fractured structure of *The Intended* is also the focus for Benita Parry's second essay. The narrator seeks to redefine his identity and liberate himself from a colonial condition by writing the oppressor's language. Yet the fracturing of the narrative structure highlights the fact that such historical and cultural amnesia is impossible. Like the visionary Joseph, the narrative is multilocalized, dispersed, and creolized, points out Parry, undercutting the narrator's attempts to create a Standard English text and a homogenous self.

The central theme of *Disappearance*, Dabydeen's second novel, is a search for the elusive quality that is Englishness, Jean Popeau asserts. The Guyanese engineer who attempts, through science, to protect an English village from the ravages of the sea, also seeks his own colonial roots, but both prove illusive. It is perhaps only Mrs. Rutherford, with her collection of African masks, who can be perceived as a truly postcolonial figure, both self and other, through her capacity for empathy. The narrator, in his attempts to control and rationalise, is left with an identity that

seeks to banish the 'other', to banish all traces of the darkness of his colonial past.

Mark McWatt examines both novels in an attempt to show how Dabydeen, in his dual role as academic and writer, brings together postcolonial theory and West Indian literature. Dabydeen self-consciously employs postcolonial counter-discursive techniques in his writing, destabilizing the dominant discourse. In *The Intended*, Joseph's visionary reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* stands as a counter-discursive ploy, undercutting the assumed marginality of the black, illiterate 'other'. Similarly, Marlow's journey up the Congo is reduced to a sleazy fairground ride. In *Disappearance*, the narrator is free to question the authority of the books on Mrs. Rutherford's shelf. With no allegiance to Eurocentric values and no sense of cultural purity in relation to his native Guyana, he can furnish the books with the chaos of possibility, of counter-discourse. Yet such 'literary gamesmanship' and authorial intrusions are in danger of robbing the narrator of his life, warns McWatt, rendering the postcolonial novel as little more than a means of making a theoretical point.

Mario Relich sees Dabydeen's writing as essentially the dramatization of an inner conflict. In *Slave Song* and *Coolie Odyssey* Dabydeen draws attention to his own alienation and psychic divisions, a conflict inherent in a West Indian identity torn between the cultures and values of its ancestors and those of the colonial exploiters. In *The Intended*, the narrator provides a triple perspective on his experiences, drawing distinctions between a childhood in Guyana, an adolescence in Balham and an adulthood as a university student. The childhood experiences are not described chronologically and disrupt the narrative of the adolescent experiences, and this rupture between past and present is reflected in the way the language slips from adult English to childhood Creole. These narrative techniques dramatically convey the narrator's sense of psychic disorientation. Ultimately his faith in words, and his acceptance of the oral culture of Guyana, re-

leases the narrator's creative power, while Joseph succumbs to the lure of the media and finds only nothingness. The narrator's final rejection of an identity resulting from neo-colonial stereotyping confirms *The Intended* as a novel subversive about British culture.

In the final essay, Karen McIntyre deals with Dabydeen's most accomplished writing so far, the epic poem, *Turner*. McIntyre seeks to show how *Turner* records the imaginative and timeless struggle for creativity untainted by colonialism, negotiating the problems of identity and history in its passage towards creative decolonisation; that is, the dismantling of European authority and the creation of an independent identity. This is achieved through Dabydeen's use of a variety of alternative, competing selves or 'Turners', combating the notion of homogenous identity. The subject of Turner's painting, the shackling and drowning of African slaves, had previously been relegated to a footnote. By revisioning the submerged African head, giving it a body and a biography, Dabydeen elevates this footnote, which becomes a lost history and culture, 'plugging' the 'holes' in Western versions of colonial history. Rather than a purely necrophilial engagement with the past, resulting in a stale creation, or stillbirth, Dabydeen employs what McIntyre terms creative necrophilia, so that creativity is *stillborn*.

The most striking aspect of David Dabydeen's work is its concern with language and its power to redeem. From the "barbaric energy" within the brokenness of Creole in *Slave Song*, to the sensuous and lyrical beauty of the English language in *Turner*, there is a sense of mischievous playfulness in Dabydeen's attempts to pervert the language, to stretch it to its limits. In this way, Black British literature in general, and the work of Dabydeen in particular, has provided a vivid insight into the complex and contradictory nature of the Caribbean identity, together with novel and illuminating perspectives on English society and culture. Perhaps most importantly it has succeeded in breaking down and transcending the Eurocentric canons of Empire. Without doubt it has rejuvenated English literature, and enriched those it has touched.



## CHAPTER I

HIS TRUE-TRUE FACE: MASKING AND REVELATION  
IN DAVID DABYDEEN'S *SLAVE SONG*

MARK MCWATT

The writings of David Dabydeen, whether poetry, prose fiction or autobiographical sketches, provide an interesting example of the creative use of the technique of masking. The writer/narrator/poetic persona uses multiple masks in order both to suggest the complexity of the identity of the West Indian East Indian, and also, one suspects, to protect certain aspects of self from the kind of 'knowing' described by Lamming as his reason for the retreat into "the castle of my skin". It is interesting that the technique of masking which is used defensively – to discourage certain facile readings of the text of the 'self' – appears to be more prevalent in those West Indian writers (Lamming, Naipaul, Dabydeen) who seem most aware of the non-West Indian contexts in which they live and write. Other writers, such as Walcott, Brathwaite and Lovelace, use the technique of masking differently, and certainly less self-consciously.

What is interesting about the writing of Dabydeen is that he persistently calls attention to the technique of masking in his work, to the point where the technique itself assumes a part of the burden of meaning and comments on or interrogates other aspects of the work. This is perhaps best observed in *Slave Song*,<sup>1</sup> Dabydeen's first volume of poetry. In this work we are presented



with fourteen poems, each of which is itself a carefully constructed mask by means of which the poetic persona inhabits the men and women – slaves and indentured labourers – who worked the sugar lands of Guyana; but these poems, in raw Guyanese Creole, are only part of the text of *Slave Song*. There is a critical/explanatory note on each poem – often including a brief glossary of the more difficult words and expressions as well as a “translation” of the poem into standard English. There are also a number of illustrations: historical prints of slave and plantation life which also become part of the technique of multiple masking that controls the meaning and effect of the work as a whole.

This technique sets up several different loci of authority within the volume, several different ‘texts’: there is the poem itself with its vigorous Creole voice conveying aspects of lived experience and the feelings and imagination of the slave or peasant in a very powerful way. This vivid mask of suffering, of ‘pure’ energy and emotion, is then modified for the reader first by the mask of the critic/commentator and then by the mask of the translator, both insisting, it seems, on a different ‘purity’, of perspective and of expression. It is equally true, on the other hand, that the emotional integrity of the dialect voice of the poem diminishes the authority of note and of translation. The reader is thus left with a curious sensation of dislocation as the different aspects of the text suffer a partial eclipse or erasure when juxtaposed and allowed to interact. This is made clear when we sample the different levels of text pertaining to the title poem. First a stanza and refrain from the poem ‘Slave Song’:

Whip me till me bleed  
Till me beg.  
Tell me how me hanimal  
African orang-utan  
Tell me how me cannibal  
Fit fo slata fit fo hang.