

Identity Crisis and the Impact of Violence in Kwame Kwei Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen*

Dr. P. Bagavathy Rajan

Assistant Professor (SS),
Dr. Mahalingam College of Engineering
and Technology, Pollachi.
Tamilnadu, India 642 003

Literature is an imitation of life. Among the literary genres, drama has a distinctive feature. In drama, the purpose of literature is arrived at even by those who cannot read and write. They get entertained and educated by watching a drama. But, with reference to all other genres one should know to read and comprehend. Regarding drama, it is enough for one to go to the theatre. The main characters get introduced; they involve themselves in action that leads to conflicts, which reaches a climax and ends with denouement, the unraveling of plot. As Mathew Arnold points out life is criticized. And the audience is enlightened on how to avoid the pitfalls in reality.

In the play *Elmina's Kitchen* life of black people in the 21st century England is presented. W.E.B. Du Bois in the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* writes:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (5)

This is applicable to the black people in England also. Delroy the main character in the play, shortly known Deli is a representative of the traits mentioned by W.E.B. Du Bois. He tried to establish an identity on his own. He was a man with refined characters. He owned *Elmina's Kitchen*, a West Indian take away and delivery restaurant in the 'Murder Mile' hackney. In the walls of his restaurants there was a big sign: "NO DRUGS ARE PERMITTED ON THESE PREMISES. RESPECT" (p123). The quotation on life shows his refined tastes and optimistic views as well:

'Life is beauty, admire it. Life is costly, care for it. Life is wealth, keep it. Life is love, enjoy it. Life is a dream, realize it. Life is a challenge, meet it. Life is a duty, serve it. Life is a game, play it. Life is a mystery, know it. Life is an opportunity benefit from it. Life is a promise, fulfill it.' (1.1.p123)

To add to the point in Kwame Kwei Armah's own words Deli: "is a born struggler and an optimist" (1.1.p123). He named his restaurant after his mother. The atmosphere in and around the hackney was not quite healthy. Digger, a local gangster, was one of his regular

customers and Deli could not say 'no' to him. He had to protect his restaurant and so he had to put up with Digger. Armah says: "**Digger** (mid-thirties) He is very powerfully built and looks every bit the 'bad man' that he is" (1.1.p124). If Deli avoided Digger, he had to pay protection money for the gangsters. However, Deli tried to maintain the dignity and decorum. Then and there, he admonished and curtailed Diggers abusive slang.

In his business dealing with people, Deli was very honest. He followed the Gandhian principle, "business without morality is sin". He very clearly pointed out the exact time that may take to deliver the food, which was criticized by Digger.

Digger Da' is why you nigger people go fail every time. How you go tell a hungry man he have to wait forty-five minutes for he food?

Deli (shouting from the kitchen) You can't run a business on lies.
Some things shouldn't be measured in financial terms.

Digger A business is one of those thing that should! (1.1.p127)

Later he proudly pointed out to Anastasia that: "And we have a reputation in the area for excellence" (1.1. p137).

Deli and Digger discussed Spikey who own the hair shop down by Stamford Hill lights. Digger called him an informer. Both Deli and Digger admonished for his act of being an informer: "**Deli/Digger** Man fe dead lick a shot inna informer man hend" (1.1. 130). In the words of W.E.B. Du Bois he proved to be a man "being cursed and spit upon by his fellows". Deli's aim was to bring up his son in a respectable and responsible way. But the writer's introductory remark in the stage setting proves otherwise: "**Ashley, Deli's** son (nineteen), hooded street clothes, headphones. He has his hair in two bunches. Trousers falling off the arse. Has no respect for anyone older than himself except for **Digger**" (1.1. p130). In his behaviour Ashley and his father were poles apart. On the one hand Deli was very polite and dignified in his behaviour and dealings; on the other Ashley disrespected elders and showed a fascination towards Digger, the Yardie. He found fault with Deli's amiable behaviour with others. Deli was not ready to fight with people who had caused them troubles. Therefore everyone called him "Deli the sissy punk". This created an ill feeling in Ashley and he wanted to revenge them.

Deli diverted the attention to the arrival of Dougie, Deli's older and richer brother. He was in the prison and was about to be released. Deli was very much happy over the prospect and arranged a grand and a warm welcome for his brother. Deli went into the kitchen to make food ready for delivery. In the meantime Ashley talked about Digger's business and his wish to join him. Deli arrived and handed over the food for delivery. When Ashley departed for delivering the food: "**Deli** stares at the door that **Ashley** exited with great concern in his eyes" (1.1. p127). This depicts Deli's intention of raising his son to respectability. He would like to establish an identity of a responsible father in rearing up his son. A kind of father figure Deli actually did not have. Deli's father Clifton had abandoned his mother Elmina many years ago and had been leading a frivolous life. This created a negative impact in the mind of Deli. He did not want the same fate to befall on his own son. He wanted to teach moral values to his son. Therefore he tried to exhibit himself as a good

role model for his son. He rebuked Baygee, a West Indian door to door salesman, for indulging in gambling.

Baygee Hey, Delroy, give me a quick shot of Clark's and have one you yourself, I win ten pounds on the lottery today. What James Brown say? ...
Deli You still playing that stupidity? (1.1.p.133)

Later when Digger was watching the horse gambling show in TV, Deli reproached him, "Take the horse gambling off, Digger" (1.1. p142).

Deli would like to build up another identity in the society. Deli was not happy over the atmosphere in which they were living. Violence, bloodshed and atrocities abounded the place. Even he himself had to put up with Digger, a Yardie. People like Digger felt that black people were not treated as equals and still the discrimination existed. Deli recalled the words of his father about black's life in England: "'We have entered a stranger's dream, and for trespassing he has rewarded us with his worse nightmare' is what my father use to say about living in England" (1.3. p164). Deli wanted to create an identity for the black. He wished to demonstrate that the black people could also be honest, decent, polite and gentle in their behaviour. And thus would like to make an impact in the society. He wanted to prove that he could win people by these traits than by involving in violence and bloodshed as Diggers and other did and his son was aspiring to do. He informed one day to Digger that he was going to bank and Digger criticized him:

Digger *busts out laughing*
Deli What you laughing at?
Digger What bank is going to give you money, nigger?
Deli One that could recognize I've been a businessman from morning ...
Digger ... And one that ignore your black skin?
Deli Ahhhhh fuck that old school shit, Digger. That was some old eighties shit you talking. (1.2. p145)

At the same time Deli was aware of the present scenario of violence. When they were making arrangement for Dougie's arrival Baygee asked at what time his brother was reaching. Deli replied: "Ahh you know Dougie, he said today *sometime* but I'll believe it when I see him" (1.1. p140). Deli proved to be correct in his judgment. No sooner did Dougie stepped out of the prison than, he was killed by some miscreants. He became a prey to violence. The news of Dougie's death came as a sudden blow for Deli. Instead of welcome arrangement it proved to be a funeral for Dougie.

Anastasia a women of forty-two approached the restaurant and enquired for job vacancy. She was employed by Deli in his restaurant. In the stage direction Armah's remark about Anastasia is she:

"... has a kind of body that most men of colour fantasise about. Big hips and butt, slim waist and full, full breasts. There is something incredibly sexual about her

presence. Beneath the very well applied 'make-up we can see that she must once have been a real beauty.' (1.1.p133)

As the play proceeded, Anastasia, then and there, gave good pieces of advice to Deli in shaping the character of Ashley. They understood each other and became intimate. Once they discussed the past of Deli and the atmosphere in the restaurant. She wanted to clean things by avoiding people like Digger. Deli shared how irresponsible his father had been. He was a glutton, drunkard and was not affectionate towards him. Once he had accident in the kitchen, when he was a boy. His mother was very much worried that Deli might have got injuries. But his father was very much concerned with the spoiled chicken and had beaten him up. When they were thus discussing Anastasia expressed her liking for him and threw her arms around him and kissed. Deli too kissed but could not respond fully. He withdrew himself. He was much worried about the identities that he would like to establish in the society and before his son. Therefore he repressed his feelings. He said:

Deli I ain't got nothing else to offer you right now.

She doesn't reply.

(Angry.) The boys are betting on when I'm gonna fuck you, Anastasia! Ashley's betting.

Anastasia I don't watch what other people think. (1.3.p166)

Clifton, Deli's father came for Dougie's funeral. Deli was not happy over his father's visit. With reference to Clifton, seriousness was not in his line. He never really mourned for his dead son. But, he always remained tipsy, sang songs and raved over unimportant things. In the second act, when Deli refurbished his restaurant into Elmina's Plantain Hut, Clifton enjoyed the party to the fullest:

Clifton: *(taking the piss)* Upmarket launch? It was a party! And when man have party people suppose to dance, not stand up and chat. What de arse this generation coming to? (2.1.p171)

But at the same time Clifton could rightly judge what Anastasia was after. He could vaguely remember her. He had met her sometimes in the past in a party. Now in the restaurant party he danced with Anastasia and invited her to spend the night with him. Baygee advised Clifton not to misbehave with the woman. He guessed that his son Deli might be in love with her. Clifton turned deaf ears to his advice and replied: "Clifton: (all innocence) Is not the boy woman yet. Anyway, there's only two woman in the world I wouldn't trouble, me modder and me sister. And both ah dem dead" (2.1.p178). That night both slept together. Clifton threatened Anastasia and made her to leave the place. He very well knew that she was after Deli's and Dougie's money.

Ashley's behaviour turned from the worse to worst. He threw away his college books in the dustbin and decided to join hands with Digger. Along with Digger he burnt Roy's restaurant. He was ready to even fight with his father and assault him when Deli reprimanded him for his behaviour. Deli was much worried when he came to know that

Ashley was involved in the act of burning Roy's restaurant. He decided to put an end to Digger. He told Digger to leave his restaurant. When his son was at stake, Deli did not want to continue his business. Deli decided to abandon his restaurant and put an end to the gangsters. Hence, he made a report to the police and decided to leave the hackney. He wanted to provide his son with a better conducive atmosphere to prosper. When Digger came to know about this, he ordered Ashley to shoot his father. Ashley in fact was ready and placed his fingers in the trigger. Violence and bloodshed had that much attraction and Ashley became a victim. It was so alluring that it had put Ashley in a position to get ready to kill even his lovable father. But, Digger knew very well about the object of Deli's love. So, he shot Ashley dead and avenged Deli.

Deli was shattered when his objects of love were no more. In the beginning Deli loved his mother. But she was abandoned by his father and led a miserable life. Later, he thought of leading a happy life with his brother. He became a victim to violence. Then he had a liking for Anastasia. But his father openly told him that, "I fucked her to prove I was right. She was a thieving little whore who was only after you and Dougie money" (2.3.p 199). Now his most beloved son became a victim to violence.

The identity that Deli had liked to establish proved to be fragile. In the beginning Deli did not like informers. He admonished them along with Digger: "**Deli/Digger** Man fe dead lick a shot inna informer man hend" (1.1. 130). Later he turned out to be one. He repressed his feelings for Anastasia. He did not behave normally as his fellow men did. He wanted to establish an order in disorder. He wanted to prove himself to be a dignified and gentle personality. In this process, the suppression of his natural instincts got perverted and made him act differently. In the book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* in the chapter on Psychoanalytic Criticism while discussing Freud, Peter Barry says:

... .. Linked with this is the idea of *repression*, which is 'forgetting' or ignoring of unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, or traumatic past events so that they are forced out of conscious awareness and into the realm of the unconscious. A similar process is that of sublimation, whereby the repressed material is 'promoted' into something grander or is disguised as something 'noble'. For instance, sexual urges may be given sublimated expression in the form of intense religious experiences or longings. (93-94)

The character of Deli could be observed from another perspective. Originally the black people had their own unique culture and tradition. Later they were enslaved and were socially and economically oppressed. Even after the emancipation, discrimination and inequality existed. In an interview, after becoming a reputed playwright, Kwei Armah expressed his regret over the discrimination that exists between the black and the white and the way the black people are treated even in the 21st century. He quoted the point that an eleven year old black boy would be excluded from the school three times as often as their white counterparts for the same offence. The black will be easily attributed and earmarked to the qualities of evil and immorality. Deli wanted to create dignified characteristic traits for the black. He himself wanted to prove that by exhibiting a gentle personality through his behaviour. Thus he struck a difference between other characters in the play. Peter Barry comments in his essay "Postcolonial Criticism" proves to be apt:

Characteristically, post colonial writers evoke or create a precolonial version of their own nation, rejecting the modern and the contemporary, which is tainted with the colonial status of their countries. Here, then, is the first characteristic of postcolonial criticism – an awareness of representation of non-European as exotic or immoral ‘Other’. (187)

Hannah Arendt in her essay “On Violence” writes:

Violence can always destroy power. Out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it (violence) is power.” (For example, violence and threat of violence by the emperors Caligula and Nero did not enhance their power. It diminished their power. (8)

This proves to be appropriate. Violence in *Elmina’s Kitchen* did not create any power for the black. On the contrary it damaged the identity and confidence of optimistic people like Deli. Further the Yardies like Digger will continue to grope in the dark (violence) for betterment.

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