

Imagining Difference in Maggie Gee's *My Cleaner* and *My Driver*

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Abstract

What happens when an African domestic cleaner decides that she is tired of pretending to be humble and tells her white English employer “I am leaving the dishes for you to wash” (Gee 2006: 83). And what happens when this challenging Ugandan character is written by a white novelist? This paper focuses on these questions analysing the shifting power dynamics between the two female counterparts in Maggie Gee's *My Cleaner* and her subsequent novel *My Driver*. In fact, Gee not only deconstructs stereotypes and rather patronising forms of racism, but also explores the contact zones, diasporic movements and negotiations of metropolitan citizens and contemporary postcolonial subjects in a way which is very close to bell hooks' notion of “yearning”, understood as a possible “fertile ground for the recognition of common commitments” (hooks 1993). By settling the characters of *My Cleaner* at first in London and later letting them travel to Uganda in *My Driver*, the author claims the existence of far more fluid boundaries between race, class and gender. In this regard, both novels can be read through the concepts of “transposition” and “conviviality” developed recently by Rosi Braidotti and Paul Gilroy respectively, and closely linked to bell hook's aforementioned notion of “yearning”. This paper pays attention to the importance of the awareness of these, sometimes rather ambiguous and not always clear, solidarities, alliances and amalgamations in which black and white, immigrants and national people negotiate and renegotiate continuously their positions within society. Furthermore, creating different viewpoints involves in both novels the effort of finding “common commitments” and highlights the importance of empathy ties in current processes of cohabitation. This work seeks to demonstrate how Gee's creative act of “imagining difference” has not to be seen as colonisation but, in the author's own words, “as a belief in our essential equality” (2009: 17).

My aim in this paper is to present and compare the novels *My Cleaner* (2006) and *My Driver* (2010) written by the British author Maggie Gee. In these novels she describes the particular relationship between two contemporary metropolitan women: Mary Tendo, a proud Ugandan, former immigrant and cleaner of Vanessa Henman, portrayed as a quintessential British middle aged novelist. Gee settles in London and Kampala the shifting power dynamics between migrant and host citizens, which are currently being discussed in many countries of Europe. But Gee does not dwell upon the typical role allocation and clichés that usually accompany this kind of topics. On the contrary, as I will show, by settling her characters of *My Cleaner* at first in London and letting them travel to Uganda in her subsequent novel *My Driver*, the author claims the existence of far more fluid boundaries between race and class. In this way, both novels refocus questions of difference and multiculturalism in a new and challenging way and throw some light onto current debates and issues around immigration and racism.

In fact, what happens when the Ugandan character in *My Cleaner* decides that she is tired of being humble and tells her employer?: “I am leaving the dishes for you to wash” (2006: 83). And what happens when this challenging Ugandan character is created by a white novelist? Is Maggie Gee appropriating the experience and internal world of Mary Tendo? Is this again a story of oppression and colonisation as the author asks herself? (Gee 2009: 12).

Gee forms part of the generation of English authors which includes Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Angela Carter, but since her first novel *Dying, In Other Words* (1981), her writing has undergone many changes. Taking into account that her earlier works can be described as surrealist, modern gothic and postmodern, she passes from her first interest in technical innovation to questions of personal morality in private life, moving more recently towards themes of racist violence, interracial relationships and the impact of the encounters with different cultures. Her eighth novel, for instance, *The White Family* (which was shortlisted for the Orange Prize and the International IMPAC Prize in 2002) is a condition-of-England novel, in which, for the first time, she offers an in-depth exploration of racism, writing across colour boundaries and giving voice not only to a young white racist but also to black characters (Jaggi 2002; McKay 1998).

It is in 2003, when Maggie Gee was invited by Cheltenham Festival to do a four-week exchange with the Ugandan novelist Ayeta Anne Wangusa, that she began working on *My Cleaner*. Written first in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, it was intended as a short story based on the memories of Mary Tendo’s childhood in the former British colony. Nevertheless, the story developed into a novel as soon as the author introduced Mary’s white counterpart Vanessa. As Gee explains:

I also understood that I was writing a two-hander, and that one of the central themes was not just Vanessa’s misunderstandings, but how Mary and Vanessa misunderstand each other, and also how they slowly work towards something better. Mary gets Vanessa wrong just as much as Vanessa gets Mary wrong. In short, I was writing about how both characters are dealing with difference, looking across a boundary category that at times blinds them to each other. And very soon indeed the thing I was writing had grown too long to be a short story and was on its way to being a novel. (2009: 15-16)

In *My Driver*, based upon the same main characters, Gee unfolds these dealings and renegotiations of what had once been a master-servant relationship. This sequel came out in 2009 and is in many respects a mirror image of Mary’s and Vanessa’s previous adventures. Thus in *My Driver* it is Vanessa Henman who is off her ground in

Uganda. The author continues to spin the story around the misunderstandings and “the revelation of the likeness under the difference” between Mary and Vanessa (Gee 2009: 16). But now it is Vanessa and her ex-husband Trevor who travel to Kampala while Mary embodies the role of host in Uganda for the couple who were once her masters in Britain.

Significantly, Maggie Gee does not see the main critical moment for her writing about difference in her metaphor for the changing relationship between Britain, the former colonial power, and Uganda, the former colonised country. To her, the difficulty arose when she decided to write Mary Tendo in the first person as she did with Vanessa:

I say this was the critical moment because it is here that all the difficult questions about imagining difference arise. Did I have the right to inhabit Mary Tendo’s mind? Could I *be* Mary Tendo, in the first person? Could I use her voice? Could I really, deeply, imagine her? Would I get it wrong? Would I be criticised? More fundamentally, was I stealing her story? (Gee 2009: 16)

Gee’s concern about appropriation is not unfounded because, like other novels which deal with different voices and cross established boundaries, she had some problems with publishing *My Cleaner* (Gee 2009: 12-13). But, as she comments, this demand of “authenticity” by the publishers also constrained the creative act of writing and imagining. Looking at some of Gee’s previous novels, such as *Grace*, *The Ice People* or *The White Family*, her efforts to imagine difference are evident even if it means to represent the internal life of someone which forms part of an oppressed group or nation, and this despite the writer’s belonging to the apparently stronger or oppressing group.

How to avoid appropriation and prejudice, then? Gee’s main strategy in *My Cleaner* and *My Driver* is humour. giving her characters comic features, she induces the reader to distrust the visions and conceptions of her protagonists. As a result, Mary Tendo begins *My Cleaner* claiming for rights which she never would have dared to insist upon twenty years before when she first arrived in London. These claims disturb considerably her proud counterpart Vanessa. If initially Vanessa tries to maintain the former balance of power, Mary starts to unsettle Vanessa’s self-condescendence and prejudiced opinions as soon as she arrives in the British metropolis. It is Vanessa who needs Mary’s help desperately, because her son Justin has got a depression and Mary is the only person he wants to see and in whom he confides.

In *My Driver*, when Vanessa travels to Uganda, Mary Tendo's personality does not remain flawless. She too has to fight her prejudices and preconceptions:

She is here alone. She is not working, or caring for the baby, the daughter she cannot bear to talk to, or giving orders to the maid. She can think about her life, and the visit to the village. And the thing like a stone, the loss of her son. [...] I have not been grateful for what He has given. I am too angry with everyone. Perhaps I have been trying to punish God by not coming to church, because of what happened. But He gave the village water. The water of life. He made Trevor able to mend the well. And yet I tried to punish Trevor, also, for being an ignorant *muzungu* in Uganda... I could not stop being angry with him. Still it was good for Trevor to feel like me, when I was in my twenties, and first came to London, and cleaned their toilets and their offices. The English made me feel like an ignorant Ugandan. They thought I knew nothing, and understood nothing. (2010: 320)

As a matter of fact, Mary and Vanessa undergo changes in both novels and evolve towards a kind of mutual recognition. In the multiple layers and features of the two female protagonists, Gee portrays and claims a fundamental likeness which lingers under their differences. The author explains that this "likeness under difference" becomes explicit near the end of *My Cleaner*, when Mary sees that the house where Vanessa lived as a child is smaller and poorer than the house where Mary grew up in Uganda (Gee 2009: 18). At a certain moment the two women, who are about to cross a road, look into a mirror which is reflecting them and, for the first time, they become aware of this likeness:

Vanessa spots it at the same time, and as they stand there, waiting for the stream of metal to stop and let them back into kinder country, the sun comes out, an illuminates it. Both of them stop and stare at it, side by side, pressed close together by the narrow gap between the thorns and the lorries. It is a small, radiant disc of sharp beauty, with a huge blue sky and swelling white clouds, a convex circle that shines like a world, and they are there, minute, in the bottom right corner, at the end of a road that slopes away into the distance, at one precise vortex of time and space, and the world is enormous, and they are tiny, and their ant-like bodies vibrate with the traffic, two small living things on an enormous planet, and Mary has crossed the earth to this place, and when she turns again, ten feet down the lane, the two of them merge into the same bright dot. (2010 253-54)

To explain this likeness they share, we could resort to the notion of "yearning". The black feminist writer and poet bell hooks understands "yearning" as a "shared space and feeling that opens up the possibility of common ground where all these differences might meet and engage one another" (1990: 13). Furthermore, hooks argues that this shared space cuts across boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexual practice and has to be considered as the possible "fertile ground for the construction of empathy —ties

that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition” (1990: 27). Interestingly, she also links this notion to the post-modernist deconstruction of master narratives and locates this longing for a critical voice in the hearts and minds of those whom such narratives have silenced (990: 27).

Bearing this in mind, the respective yearnings of Mary and Vanessa can be certainly considered as the string which links the two novels. Throughout their stories they both long for their sons, to become writers and to find their own space in society. This common yearning enables them to feel empathy toward each other despite their evident differences. The ending of *My Driver* illustrates this recurring idea of “likeness under difference”, when Vanessa and her ex-husband Trevor bring Mary’s son back to Kampala acting as guides and Mary recovers not only her lost son Jamil, but also finds a way to start talking to her baby daughter. Gee describes the reconciliation of the protagonists as follows:

You found my son. God be praised, you have found my son [...] And after a while, she embraces Vanessa. Through their thin clothes, they feel the hearts thudding. Through tears and tiredness and the limits of skin.

Mary: Vanessa

Vanessa: Mary

Then she hugs Charles. And then Trevor. People stare and linger as they pass by. It is some time before the little group of people in strange, dramatic attitudes out in the road are composed enough to go inside. They keep shouting and sobbing, laughing and hugging. (2010 355-56)

At the end of both novels nothing remains the same. The encounter of the two women, both flawed and human, none of them a victim, will lead not only the protagonists but also the reader towards a new awareness. In this way, through these contact zones between “the other and the self”, Gee manages not only to redeem and open new ways for her protagonists but claims also a “spontaneous convivial culture” which Paul Gilroy defines in his book *Postcolonial Melancholia* as the “ability to live with alterity without becoming anxious, fearful, or violent” (2005: XV). Gee’s protagonists already form part of this new society whose diasporic and nomadic movements can be seen also as an opportunity to origin sites of coalition and solidarity. As Gee writes in “Imagining Difference”:

In the end, I think that what I call ‘the viewpoint of the other’ is always of legitimate interest: how a woman imagines a man, how a young person imagines an old person, how a cleaner sees an employer and vice versa. The focus swings back and forth from the other to the self (2009: 18)

What is more, enacting these differences creatively enables the author to express her belief in empathy and sympathy as factors that could transcend differences in the same way as bell hooks' idea of yearning. As Maggie Gee expresses it:

Do I believe that external differences of skin-colour, gender, age, political and cultural tradition, are secondary to what we share? To these questions I would answer with a resounding 'Yes'. [...] I do believe that empathy and sympathy between people are possible. So there is a basis for trying to imagine each other; for writing across geographical, gender and cultural barriers. And I see that act not as colonisation but on the contrary as a belief in our essential equality (2009: 17).

In the end, Maggie Gee draws attention towards the “remade relationship with our heterogeneous selves, working through the after effects of empire in a self-consciously multicultural nation” as Gilroy puts it (2005: 135). Indeed, if Gilroy uses the term “conviviality” to refer to “the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life in Britain’s urban areas” (2005: XV), the protagonists of *My Cleaner* and *My Driver* imply that this is not only possible to achieve through the capacity to negotiate, imagine and perform one’s own subjectivity anew but also through the shifting focus between the other and the self. Therefore, Gee reaches beyond the traditional deconstruction of stereotypes and patronising forms of racism. And more importantly, through this newly gained consciousness of “likeness under difference”, she explores and portrays the contact zones and negotiations of metropolitan citizens and contemporary postcolonial subjects.

In conclusion, for Maggie Gee the act of creating different viewpoints in both novels means the effort of finding common commitments. In this sense, she highlights the importance of empathy-ties in current processes of cohabitation. This effort of imagining difference becomes so valuable because it calls into question the centre of traditional representations and it consequently enables the reader, in the same way as the writer, to look at his or her life through a new perspective.

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