



Book Review

A Black Englishman, by Carolyn Slaughter

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ABSTRACT

A Black Englishman is the ninth novel of the English author Carolyn Slaughter, currently living in the United States. Her first novel *The Story of the Weasel* won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize in 1977. She was born in New Delhi. Her father was member of the Indian Imperial Police. The family left India in 1947 during the Partition of India and moved to Swaziland. He was then in the Colonial Service and they were posted to a remote area of the Kalahari Desert. Currently she works as a psychotherapist in Lawrenceville, New Jersey in the USA.

In her sweeping ninth novel published by Faber and Faber, London in 2004, Slaughter loosely retells the story of her maternal grandmother, who moved to India after World War I with her husband serving in military and ended up in an insane asylum at the age 30. Slaughter discovered that her maternal grandmother, whom she had never met, had been confined in mental institutions since 1936. Carolyn found she was now in an asylum in Ealing and went to visit her only to find there was nothing wrong with her except she has become institutionalized. A novelization of her maternal grandmother's life, *A Black Englishman* was published in 2004.

The setting of the novel is India of the 1920s: exotic, glamorous, and painfully sliding away from England's colonial grip, only to be thrown into ethnic violence and terrorism. In 1920, when the British Raj is on the wane, Isabel Herbert, the fictional protagonist and narrator, mourning the death of her fiancé, exhausted by all the suffering caused by World War I, in search of herself and in flight from the ravages of the War, escapes the War's bad memories, by hastily marrying and accompanying her husband, Sergeant Neville Webb, to India. When Isabel boards the ship that will take her to another continent, her mother tells her, "You've made your bed now, you'll have to lie on it." Isabel's mother married beneath her. Her daughter, on the other hand, to escape the terrible sadness of the war's aftermath, hooked-up with a man of ordinary origins. Neville is common in

many ways: a selfish, coarse, and womanizer. He had his own reasons for wanting to get married quickly while on vacation. And Isabel longs to leave the UK and all memories associated with it. She is fleeing from herself and from her lack of means to begin a life alone. She could just "howl for the freedom of our youth, our happiness, then, before the war came down on us, so that before you knew it, all that you'd ever known and loved was gone." And, "It (the war) left us broken, unable to go back to where we were, or who we were before, because with all our young men lost and gone, the young girls vanished too." World War I certainly makes its presence felt here, because if it had not been for that devastating conflict, this extremely bright, independent, university educated young woman of the upper classes would never have married a man like

Neville Webb, giving him all power over herself and her future. Fortunately, Isabel's mother thought to set up a private bank account for her daughter in India which came to her use when she had no other means to survive. Even before the couple arrives in Ferozepore, Punjab, one of the fourteen provinces of the British Raj and their destination, Neville arrogantly attempts to smother his wife's enthusiasm for the new country, its cultures and languages. "The English people certainly do love India. It's the Indians they can't stand." He is perfectly clear about her adhering strictly to protocol, no socializing about and no exploring on her own. He also explains he will be gone, with his regiment, the Fifth Royal Gurka Rifles, for almost ten months of the year, because there is always trouble on the border with Afghanistan.

Upon the couple's arrival at the cantonment, there is an "unfortunate incident." A British soldier shot and killed his wife and then committed suicide. The woman was having an affair with a native Indian and no one on there appeared to be surprised at the consequences. The Black Englishman of the title, Dr Sam (Samresh) Singh, a product of Eton and Balliol, has returned to India to work as a doctor. He is first seen by the narrator, Isabel, as he attends a domestic murder at the cantonment where her husband is posted. Isabel, of course, is shocked and horrified by the gruesome incident. Neville takes off for the border after a few days and his new wife is left to her own.

She is immediately seduced by the country's voluptuous grandeur, and by the titular black Englishman, Sam Singh, an Oxford-educated Indian doctor who attends Isabel when she is suffering with malaria fever. Sam, as he is called, is a man of two worlds, and of none. He is Hindu. He is born in India and brought up in England. He speaks and acts like an English gentleman of the upper classes. Yet he is not Anglo English. He has always been looked down upon by the British. His position is similar to the person caught between the devil and the sea. The Indian nationalists look at Sam with disdain. They see him as a traitor to the cause of Independence. Singh is a "Black Englishman." Isabel and Sam fall deeply in love

and share an intellectual, physical and emotional intimacy with each other. She is thrust headlong into a passionate and dangerous liaison with Sam. Their devotion to each other takes them across the length and breadth of India and to the brink of disaster. As both of them love each other, they plan how to get together without alerting the servants, and therefore the cantonment. This is achieved by hiding out in Shimla during the summer. Neville, meanwhile, is away fighting the Afghans. The arcadia does not last. An army officer blows their cover when he arrives to summon Dr. Singh to attend those wounded after a massacre near Rawalpindi.

Their affair, as Isabel writes in a letter to Sam, "will take us to the limits of our courage," and both suffer for it. However, Isabel greatly underestimates her husband's wrath and the extent of his revenge, just as she overestimates her illusory independence as she seeks an identity of her own. In addition to a thousand small injustices, Isabel is attacked by her cuckolded husband and nearly sent to an asylum, and Sam is unfairly arrested and brutalized in connection with a terrorist attack.

Slaughter here tells a beautiful, haunting love story, set against the backdrop of religious violence and political turmoil. Her novel is filled with sharp observations about class, sex, imperialism and especially race, but she sometimes drives home her points too bluntly, as when Isabel muses: "Would I desire him if his skin were ebony.... What's the exact shade of rejection, anyway, and when does otherness become revulsion?" Despite the occasional slide into didacticism, this is a moving and powerful tale.

Carolyn Slaughter paints, with beautiful prose, a vivid portrait of India during the last years of the Raj. Along with an accurate depiction of the political unrest of the period, the class system, and the hardships faced by women, both native and European, she gives the reader a wonderful peek at the Indian landscape, especially Northern India, as well as the flavor and color of the local cultures. She seamlessly interweaves the couple's story with historic events. Her characters, especially Isabel,

Sam, and an Indian servant, Joseph, are three dimensional, complex and extremely likable. This is a powerful and erotic love affair that combines the themes of colonial exploitation, political and ethnic tensions, race and sexuality, and the many forms of partition, both secular and religious, that endanger our world. *A Black Englishman* is an epic and intimate novel about love and loyalty, revenge and faith, race and identity. Here Slaughter steps up the action, mingling historical events with the fate of the characters, though with some liberality over dates. Her Hindu-Muslim massacre sounds closer to the atrocities of Partition than the riots of 1920. Slaughter's power to portray a particular place and culture is considerable.

The heroine and narrator of the novel shares the same surname - Webb - as the author's grandmother, but differs in that she is determined to survive, even when forcibly sent to the asylum of Ranchi. Slaughter has acknowledged 17 writers without whom, she says she could not have contemplated writing about India. They include Forster, Narayan, Rushdie and Ruth Praver Jhabvala, but the author probably owes most to Paul Scott, who first wrote of that uneasy hybrid of the Raj: the English-public-school educated Indian.

However, the novel is designed less for old India hands than for a market new to the subcontinent. Slaughter's descriptions of India are vividly evocative - such as the slow progress of humanity along the Grand Trunk Road towards the mountains as heat strikes the plains, and the hotel for passing Europeans with its sherry and croquet lawns.

Slaughter seems to reject the norms of the English paperback genre, converting it with her own emotional vitality. Her art sheds the conventions of romantic fiction. She has written this novel which is characterized by a naked honesty which is at times almost confessional. While her themes are those of paperback romances—love, relationships, and the family—her quest for psychological reality leaves the art of idealization and euphemism far behind.

Slaughter portrays the dark knots of bitterness and vulnerability, pain and need, which lie within the individual psyche. Her vision strikes dramatic contrasts to fictional norms. We find the thirst for psychological honesty in this novel. In her work we find, if not explicit, the use of psychoanalysis; the search for inner knowledge and confrontation with the secrets hidden within the self. Her plot is driven by the momentum of unfolding knowledge. As in classical tragedy, there is a pattern of concealment and revelation leading to eventual denouement and catharsis. At the climax of her novels are realizations. Slaughter also scrutinizes tensions between people, particularly between lovers. This novel shows how our deepest needs become focused on the objects of erotic attraction.

Author's Profile

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