

Racial Discrimination and Gender inequality in Winsome Pinnock's Mules

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Abstract:

The present research paper attempts to explore the theme of Racial Discrimination and Gender inequality in Winsome Pinnock's *Mules*. *Mules* is a story of black female drug smugglers in the late 1990's England and Jamaica. It examines the similarities between women needing escape from their subjugated positions in materialistic patriarchal societies. The play deals with the global scale between oppressed women in Jamaica and women in the Great Britain. *Mules* draws attention to the ways that stereotypes of black women's racial discrimination and gender inequality through the ironic reference to a male determined irresponsible and inhumane society. This work is celebrated for challenging racist and sexist images of black British women in the Great Britain.

Key Words: Race, Gender, Inequality, Discrimination, poverty and Black British etc.

Mules, commissioned by the Clean Break Theatre, dramatizes the predicament of a few black women who are trapped in drug trafficking. This theatre company was set up in 1979 by former women prisoners that dealt with women's experiences of criminality and the legal system and prison. The play was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre on 25th April, 1996. *Mules* is the outcome of Winsome Pinnock's dramatic research about the black women prisoners in London and in Jamaica. Lynette Goddard, (a well-known theater critic) in her article entitled; "West Indies vs. England in Winsome Pinnock's Migration Narratives" makes an observation about Winsome Pinnock and her plays. She states:

Pinnock places black women at the centre of her plays and she is committed to telling our untold stories, but she successfully reaches beyond the particulars of black experiences to touch 'universal' themes that make her plays easily accessible to audience members at high profile theatre venues.¹

Mules, set in the late 1990s England and Jamaica, deals with the issues like racial discrimination, gender inequality, sexploitation and double marginality in the life of black British women characters in the multicultural society of the Great Britain. It is a play which talks about the problem of the poverty in the life of black women of Caribbean country like Jamaica. The black and white female characters are involved in this play who works as drug traffickers. They are the victims and slaves of high profile drugs agencies. The other issues of *Mules* are migration, sexism, ethnicity, homelessness, exile, displacement, assessing local and global networks of women and the limits imposed on them and the impact of travel on their lives. But this research Paper strives to analyze, interpret and evaluate *Mules* with the special reference to the themes such as; 'racial discrimination', 'gender inequality' in the life of Black British Women.

The setting of the play is in two countries. *Mules* is located in multi-cultural Britain and impoverished country. Jamaica. Most of the scenes of the play take place in two cities- London and Kingston. London is a capital and multicultural centre of the world, whereas Kingston is the exotic holiday destination for foreigners. The vital point of this play is that the international destination has been chosen for the part of the play for the business of drug smuggling. The surprising fact about this play is women are involved in the business as drug smugglers.

The action of the play is alternatively trans-located in two cities (London and Kingston), not as a multi-racial capital but social relations of the people. This play is a

story of ‘drug mules’. The mules (especially women) insert drug pockets in their genitals. Pinnock depicts the harsh reality of women who are involved in drug trafficking. It is an illegal trade between poor and rich countries, and it is mostly handled by the black women in the late twentieth century. The play highlights the similarities between women who need to escape from their subjugated positions in materialistic patriarchal societies and the parallels on a global scale between oppressed women in Jamaica and the women in the Great Britain.

The play has twelve characters. These characters are Bridie, Lyla, Lou, Olu, Allie, Bad Girl 1, Bad Girl 2, Pepper, Piglet, Rog, Sammie and Rose. Out of them, Bridie, Lyla, Lou and Olu are the black women characters; whereas Allie, Bad Girl 1 and Bad Girl 2, Pepper, Piglet, Rog, Sammie and Rose are the white women characters. Pinnock has mentioned only two male characters in this play, but these characters never appear on the stage. The first is Cliveden, Bridie’s boss, who runs the drugs trade in the Great Britain, and the second is the owner of the ganja plantation in Jamaica. Though, there is not a single male character that appears on the stage, but Pinnock shows their powerful and invisible force and direct and indirect effects of patriarchy on black women in this play. In *Mules*, the multiplicity of the interrelated and interwoven of gender and race based issues are highlighted. In his article, entitled; “Discovering an Identity which has been Squashed: Intercultural and Intracultural Confrontations in the Plays of Winsome Pinnock and Ayub Khan-Din”, Bernhard Reitz states:

Since the drug-trafficking is under the control of a man who is referred to in the first scene as Cliveden, but who never appears on stage, and since all the couriers are female, the play begins with a gender-based issue.²

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, ‘Mule’ is “a person who agrees to carry illegal drugs into another country in return for payment by the person selling the drugs.”³ It is a disparaging term for women drug couriers. Six out of twelve characters are ‘Mules’ in the play. The mules are recruited among the losers from poor Caribbean country like Jamaica.

One of the major characters of the play is Allie, who is a runaway from her home because she could not bear the exploitation of her stepfather who drugged and robbed her brutally. She comes to London in search of job. She shares many similarities with the Jamaican sisters - Lyla and Lou. They have realized and acknowledged the fact that in the ghetto of Kingston they will have no future.

Lyla and Lou live in poverty in Kingston, Jamaican provincial ghettos but they have a dream to run their own business. After the interaction with Bridie, they involved in drug trafficking to earn money and settle their own business in Kingston. Both are poor, and they used to run a market stall to sell the secondhand women’s undergarments on Kingston Street. Bridie, a drug agent, recruits them as ‘mules or drug traffickers’.

Olu is another character. She is the Nigerian illegal immigrant in London who dies from an overdose of cocaine filled condom which bursts inside her genital. She is the first woman in this play who becomes a victim of poverty and criminality.

Bridie is a charismatic and glamorous character in this play. She is a black drug-entrepreneur, who adopts the modern American lifestyle. She recruits drug runners from the Caribbean, African and the European countries such as the Great Britain and Jamaica. She actually has not her own house. She lives in posh hotels in various countries, and she is a bit of a show-off. She impresses poor and needy women by telling them impressive tales of her own rise from the provincial of Jamaica to a lifestyle moving between posh hotels room and travelling to various countries. One thing Bridie found in Jamaica is the place where hardship, poverty and lack of opportunities are prevalent. In her article Goddard elucidates Bridie’s character as below:

--- (Bridie) has risen from the Jamaican ghettos and now wears Nicole Farhi suits and adopts Americanisms to entice and recruit drugs runners. Pinnock's warning against revering Western consumerism is captured in an image of Bridie, severely beaten and having her wounds tended by the young women who had hopes that she would rescue them.⁴

The contradiction in the play is when Bridie offers luxury home to Lyla and Lou, because she thinks that it is the right way to impress these poor girls. It was a great game which played by Bridie with them. Mrs. Warren of this courier trade is Bridie, a woman of impressive elegance and style. She lives a jet-set life with expensive hotels, plenty of money for expensive fashion and all the beautiful things in her life. However, the beginning of the play makes it unmistakably clear that she is promised nothing but a glitzy façade.

The imagery of mules is moving slowly because they are laden down with goods, underscores a migratory temperament that is a poignantly reflected by the women's failure to transcend their positions in a society where they are like animals. Goddard points Jeremy Kingston observation regarding *Mules*. Kingston a well-known British theatre critic, observes the condition of the black British women in *Mules*. He demonstrates:

[t]he play has an oddly old-fashioned crime does-not-pay feel to it with the women living and dying like mules.⁵

As far as the form of the play is concerned, *Mules* makes the highest demands in audiences with its twelve characters. Moreover, the action alternates between different settings in London, Jamaica and an unidentified prison in the Great Britain. The time-structure is linear, but the last scene is supposed to take place three years after the events staged before. Bernhard Reitz, in his article, takes the views of various theatre critics about the play as follow:

In reaction to this, critics have called the play 'jumpy' and 'initially rather confusing'; requiring 'quite a time for the characters to develop.'⁶

However, in the last scene of this play, after the span of three years, prison warders were in charge of Lou's life. Lou and Allie will only be able to a dream of freedom. Lyla refuses further courier services for Bridie. After the imprisonment of her sister, she returns to Jamaica. The last scene brings the sisters together again. Lyla has two children and is living in a farm for working in a ganja field. At last, however, she picks up a cutlass as well and starts to chop the weed together with her sister.

In the concluding scene, an image of Lyla suggests that she has also found her identity. *Mules* convinces in its accusation of the effect of "Western consumerism" on the citizens of "Third World Countries". What detracts from this play is the fact that Pinnock wants to expose the complex issues of identity. Goddard, in her article, highlights the issues of Winsome Pinnock. She states:

Pinnock is clearly dealing with complex issues of identity, which she simplifies somewhat in the binary divisions, and we would have to question why she presents such a largely pessimistic view of migration. What I find most interesting about her work is the way that the mainstream have celebrated and revered it as I have always felt that she relies rather too heavily on stereotypical presentations of black identity in England and the West Indies.⁷

By concluding this paper, it examines the similarities between women needing escape from their subjugated positions in materialistic patriarchal societies. The play deals with the global scale between oppressed women in Jamaica and women in the Great Britain. It seems that it is the harsh social realities of the location that the black women struggle to escape from it. Winsome Pinnock shows the issues like 'racial discrimination', 'gender inequality' and

‘double marginality’ in the lives of the black British young women in *Mules* of the late 20th and early 21st century of Britain.

NOTES

1. Lynette Goddard, “West Indies vs. England in Winsome Pinnock’s Migration Narratives,” (*Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2004) 23.
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10486800412331296291>, 14 Nov. 2014.
2. Bernhard Reitz, “Discovering an Identity which has been squashed: Intercultural and Intracultural Confrontations in the Plays of Winsome Pinnock and Ayub Khan-Din,” (*European Journal of English Studies*, vol-7, no.1, 2003) 47.
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1076/ejes.7.1.39.14822?needAccess=true>, 10 Nov. 2016.
3. The information about the term ‘Mule’ has been taken from the following website:
<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/mule>, 07 June 2017.
4. As quoted by Goddard, “West Indies vs. England in Winsome Pinnock's Migration Narratives” 31.
5. Lynette Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms- Identity, Politics, Performance* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) 77.
6. As quoted by Reitz, “Discovering an Identity which has been squashed: Intercultural and Intracultural Confrontations in the Plays of Winsome Pinnock and Ayub Khan-Din” 43.
7. As quoted by Goddard “West Indies vs. England in Winsome Pinnock's Migration Narratives” 32.