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Representation of Past and Current Oppression of Black Women in Contemporary

Black British Literature

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Literature of the Black British genre that focuses on “Black women” includes works focusing on women of African, South Asian, and Caribbean origins. In their discussion of Black women, contemporary Black British writers describe the historical objectification, torture, control, victimization, and belittlement of Black women. These authors also portray the modern difficulties these women face, including sustaining connections with countries of origin, maintaining heritage in current times, and in meeting societal expectations of jointly upholding two conflicting roles: traditional mother and modern career woman. Here, I explore David Dabydeen’s “Turner” (2002), Aminatta Forna’s

Ancestor Stones (2006), Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* (2005), Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), and Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999), all pieces of Black British literature that represent these past and current oppressions of Black women.

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Historically, British citizens of non-white origin have been referred to as “Black.” This “Black British” term originated at the end of the British Empire (1950s), when several major colonies formally gained independence. It initially referred to individuals of African, South Asian, and Caribbean descent. To some extent, the term continues to be used in Britain to signify all ethnic minority populations. Therefore, literature of the Black British genre that focuses on “Black women” includes works focusing on women of African, South Asian, and Caribbean origins. In their discussion of Black women, contemporary Black British writers describe the historical objectification, torture, control, victimization, and belittlement of Black women. These authors also portray the modern difficulties these women face, including sustaining connections with countries of origin, maintaining heritage in current times, and in meeting societal expectations of jointly upholding two conflicting roles: traditional mother and modern career woman. The literature explored herein, despite focusing on differing locations and time periods, represent these past and current oppressions of Black women.

David Dabydeen’s “Turner” (2002), Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Desertion* (2005), and Aminatta Forna’s *Ancestor Stones* (2006) give insight into the atrocious victimization of women, including obscene acts of prejudice and relentless occurrences of violence over time. These works not only enlighten readers to the painful experiences of Black women, but together, they also portray

them as objects valued only for domesticity. They are seen as simple, weak, sex objects, and, most times, defeated victims.

Dabydeen's "Turner" is a narrative poem divided into twenty-five sections, and inspired by Joseph Mallord William Turner's painting *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead & Dying* (1840). It follows a phantasmal account from one of the drowned slaves as he becomes the captain of the Atlantic and of all slaves thrown overboard. Through the imagined memories of a drowned slave, "Turner" portrays the horrors of slavery. From this haunting account, Dabydeen confronts slavery and the final realization that its repercussions cannot be transformed; its historical brutality cannot be undone. It is riddled with "the flush of betrayal and hate" capable of "hardening" one's body (25). The poem ends in complete bleakness:

No savannah, moon, gods, magicians
To heal or curse, harvests, ceremonies,
No men to plough, corn to fatten their herds,
No stars, no land, no words, no community,
No mother (42)

The finality of the lines "No stars, no land, no words, no community, / No mother" are poignant (42). Of all of the slavery-related atrocities toward men, women, and children, the speaker underscores the intensity of losing his mother. Their separation haunts him beyond death and even beyond his post-death life as

captain of the Atlantic. It is the mother and the cruelties done to her that are symbolic of the evils of slavery. Her face, and the positive memories it invokes, “can no longer be seen” after “the blackness” of slavery (26). This mother figure and other female characters within the poem illustrate the horrific experiences of Black women, along with their extremely negative representations.

The speaker initiates the entire sequence of poems when a baby is thrown overboard. He begins with a woman in labor. She is sobbing from “hurt and grief,” described as encompassing the true depths of sorrow (9). Her body is compared to a boat, with “loose and torn” sails, with “rough sailors’ hands jerking and tugging,” but to “no avail” (9). The vulnerable woman is compared to an object, and is being subjected to harm from the male crew. She is at the mercy of violent men. Her stillborn baby is thrown overboard. This is a common occurrence: “sometimes” the baby is tossed overboard “with its mother” (9). Afterwards, “stillness, but for the murmuring of women” is all that remains (9). The harm is done, but the pain and damage lives on in the women. This is the way “Turner” opens, with the utter pain, violence, and torture of Black women and their children.

For the captain of the sea, the unexpected presence of the baby brings forth memories of his real-life experiences. The forgotten years are “wakened” by the event and “awake” his memories like “salt splash burning” his eyes (17). Most strongly, he imagines memories of his mother and exudes his pining for her.

As an African boy, his village was “ambushed” by the English, and African girls were “dragged away by ropes” (11). He is led to the ship from which he is eventually thrown, while his mother “screams like a harch” (14). Turner, the captain of the slave ship, “forbids” his mother to touch him (14). His mother is violently stripped of her children by force and then inhumanely denied even a goodbye. She is treated with indescribable cruelty. The presence of the stillborn child now evokes these memories for the speaker and he quite often thinks about the mother that he was so terribly separated from. He speaks of the “wood-smoke” in her kitchen (10), and how she would watch over him with large eyes that were “full of sadness” (12). Such memories of her motherly caring are paramount. Often, she is said to comfort and envelop him in “her flesh,” exuding the warmth of motherhood that he later attempts to share with the baby delivered into the Atlantic (18).

As the baby symbolically “broke the waters” with its entrance into the speaker’s world, the years of the speaker’s memories with his mother were “stirred” (21). As a result of longing for his own mother, he cares for the baby while in a sense nurturing his own lost child within. He offers his woman breasts to the child, while “feeding” his “own hurt” (21). The baby brings his mother and “dreams of family” to the surface, all notions that the speaker now “cannot fathom” (21). Out of desperation for the female figure, the speaker looks to the moon to play the maternal and female presence. The moon is said to be his

constant companion, encompassing a motherly yet wifely role. “She” is his present and “silent full eye,” watchful “when many ships passed by indifferently” (22). After the speaker was “subtracted” from his mother, as if an inanimate object or number, “months became years” and he “forgot the face” of his mother (23). The moon now “remains watchful and loving across a vast space,” taking the place of the mother who once “pinned” him “tightly, always, to her bosom” (23). The cruel acts toward Black girls and women are powerfully conveyed, but for the speaker, his mother’s torture is the source of his gloom. She was violently stripped from her child, leaving him (the speaker) to deal with the emotions and hurt accompanying the cruelty bestowed upon Black women and their children.

Unrelenting violence toward Black women is epitomized with the imagined sisters Rima and Ellar, who represent polar opposites of one another. While Rima is powerful and independent, refusing to “shield her eyes” before her elders, Ellar is tortured mercilessly by Turner (37). She is whipped and tortured each night, “raptured before Rima,” suggesting that she must be hurt and dehumanized because of Rima’s ability to defy Black female victimization (39). Yet, even while Rima embodies strength, her life is not said to end happily either. On the contrary, she dies in childbirth after wedding a man out of “jest and spite” (37). Just as the child eventually floats away from the speaker, defying his wishes for redemption, Rima’s ending exemplifies the hopelessness for all Black women.

In the end, the brutality of slavery cannot be undone for the speaker, nor can it save or redeem the Black women it tortured.

While depicting the pain, violence, and lack of control inflicted on Black women, “Turner” simultaneously shows the demeaning way in which these women are represented. While the speaker compares Black women to white women, white women are described as “not so ample as” Black slave women. To be depicted as an “ample” Black woman was to be of purely physical value. This debasing term is symbolic of the existence of Black women as mere sexual objects, unworthy of positive characteristics or humane respect. Women in general are portrayed in a less than appealing way, as even the white women depicted show the degradation of women in the sea, regardless of race. After all, they are thrown overboard after death, and their assumed superiority in beauty is overcome by the Atlantic. The sea eventually “bloats them,” and the “salt hardens on their skin” (15). The “sea soon puffed and burst” the fineness of their lips (16). All women are depicted as domestic and valued only for childbirth. They are said to be “fat with child or afterbirth,” consumed with chores such as “mixing ingredients” (29). These same women are portrayed as immoral and unintelligent. As the speaker thinks of his sisters, he recounts them “stealing” from him and being “clumsy and stupid” (12). He waits for the day when they will be taught a lesson for their behavior, when they will be “married off soon, two goats for a bride-price” (12). These illustrations of females in general, and

Black women specifically, leave an image of Black women as meek, devalued, domestic, sexual objects, who deserve or warrant control and victimization.

Similar to the poem sequence in “Turner,” Gurnah’s *Desertion* illustrates the pain and oppression of Black women, as well as their negative and degrading portrayals. Gurnah’s work takes place in East Africa in the early 1900s, where racism and prejudice were rampant. Smiling Englishmen are said to “lash out with riding crops” at locals (38). During this time period, the British expected a “gradual decline and disappearance of the African population, and its replacement by European settlers” (82). Despite it being a later time period than the one depicted in “Turner,” *Desertion* similarly portrays Black women as oppressed victims of control, and to be unintelligent, defeated, and shameful. These representations are conveyed as the lives of an East African family are followed across two generations.

In 1899, the appearance of an Englishman, Martin Pearce, catapults a trajectory of events that starts with an illicit love affair between himself and Rehana, an East African woman. At the start, Rehana represents a Tanzanian woman quietly rebelling against a culture in which it was required for women to “suppress” sexual and independent urges (55). She dances with her fellow females, being “deliberately provocative, with exaggerated swinging of the hips and thrusting out of breasts” and remains unmarried (55). Rehana was a worry to her brother, the patriarch of her family: An East African woman “always had to

have a guardian: her father, her husband, and in the absence of both, the eldest of her brothers” (238). Rehana was a twenty-two year old unmarried woman. In this culture and at that time, this was not respected or valued. Women were expected to accept marriage offers and avoid the life of a spinster. Rehana rejected this way of life and turned down suitors that were not up to her standards. For this, she was ridiculed as being a “princess” and “too proud” (75). Her family stressed that by opposing the traditional female lifestyle, Rehana was bringing “dishonor to them all” (75). Rehana’s defiance of her oppression highlights Black women’s suppression at the time. They were expected to be domestic and attractive, but not to come across as sexual. They could not appear to be independent. On the contrary, at all stages of life, they were expected to be controlled by a man—a father, brother, or husband. Rehana attempts to break through these traditional barriers and yet, in the end, she represents a woman defeated by a man. Even after demonstrating extreme strength of character and rebuffing tradition, Rehana ends up marrying an Indian man who eventually leaves town without notice or cause. He never returns, duping both Rehana and her family.

After this degrading experience, Rehana later falls in love with Martin Pearce. She again defies all cultural constraints by leaving her home, sharing a life with him, and eventually having his child. Yet, their relationship ends when Pearce eventually abandons Rehana and returns to England. Once again, this strong and independent woman, despite her efforts, is left deserted and powerless

by a man. For her actions, and by an oppressive and male-dominated society, she is forced to live in shame. She eventually hands her child over to be raised by her brother and sister-in-law and becomes a secluded alcoholic. In the end, Rehana is symbolic of a defeated Black woman. Regardless of her efforts to combat her oppression, she is left to be a shamed victim.

Fifty years later, Rehana and Pearce's granddaughter, Jamila, is the love interest of the narrator's brother, Amin. Despite it being as modern as the 1950s, Pearce and Rehana's bloodline, Jamila, faces the same fate as her grandmother. Both Jamila and the other Black female characters present in this second half of the story represent the continued painful experiences and demeaning depictions inflicted upon Black women.

Amin is one of three siblings and the older brother of both Rashid and Farida. Farida, as a sister, is "spoken about differently and to a different timetable of change and expectations" (125). Regardless of the fifty-year time difference between the lives of Rehana and Farida, as a Black female, Farida "had other rules to follow" than the rest of her society (134). She is portrayed as failing entrance exams to school and being fully satisfied with living her life doing domestic household chores and cooking. Regardless of her parents' disappointment, Farida falls back to "these old incarcerating ways" (137). She "went about these uninspiring chores with a smile and a kind of excitement" (141). Even in the time period discussed, when hope for stronger, more independent

Black women existed, Farida stood as solid evidence for the ongoing representation of Black women as simple and incapable at succeeding outside of the home. Farida's mother's experiences paint a similar picture. While combating stereotypes and working outside of the home as a long-time and respected teacher, Farida's mother's "former students" were said "not populate the public world in the same way" as fellow male teachers' students did (151). This was because "they were women" (151). These Black women, however educated, were not thought to hold the same promise or capabilities as their male counterparts. Similarly, their Black female teachers were held in less esteem than their fellow male teachers.

Due to her mixed African and English blood, Jamila is seen as destined to be an outsider—a rebellious woman. She is thought to come from a family of untraditional female outcasts. She is accused of promiscuity, and degraded for divorcing and choosing to continue to live in a home with her own entrance. In the end, Amin, regardless of his love for Jamila, follows his family's wishes and discontinues their relationship. Like her grandmother, Jamila is deserted. Despite her attempts to break through the controlled treatment and inferior depictions of oppressed Black women, Jamila remains overpowered.

In addition to the works of Dabydeen and Gurnah, Forna's *Ancestor Stones* demonstrates Black women as an oppressed and belittled population. These women are seen as abused, abandoned, guilty, petty, and jealous. They are

valued for being dependent on males and for bearing and raising children. These experiences and representations of Black women are highlighted through a poetically written narration, by five African women, as they share the stories of their lives from their own perspectives and in their own words.

The novel commences with Abie, a middle-aged African woman who is living in London in 2003. Abie receives a letter from her cousin Alpha, which informs her that she has inherited her family's coffee plantation in Africa. This information spurs her to return to her home country in West Africa and reconnect with her four aunts: Asana, Mariama, Hawa, and Serah. Each African woman tells her own story (her important and cherished memories and experiences). The chapters alternate between the aunts' perspectives over time and through each, Abie's aunts speak to her. Each woman shares a different Black female experience. Whether physical marital abuse, the loss of a mother, social estrangement and disloyalty, or lack of personal and political freedom, Abie's aunts pass on their histories to their niece.

Abie's Aunt Asana's story acts as an example of violence and abuse toward Black women. It is also one of Black female degradation, where she is only valued for domesticity, child bearing, and sexual pleasure. After losing her twin brother Alusani, Abie's Aunt Asana's relationship with her mother becomes strained. As a young adult, she marries a man in order to escape from her mother's household. She "saw a man who was kind" to her and therefore "saw

the way to free myself from my mother” (32). As she expresses in the statement “I ran from the smoke straight into the fire,” Asana’s husband ends up being physically abusive (32). While pregnant with their first child, Asana’s husband Osman wakes her in the middle of the night. He demands that she stand silent and naked in front of him. Asana is initially confused and, although she had been taught that “a woman should never say no to her husband,” she denies his request (114). At this, Osman orders Asana not to “disobey” him, reminding her that “a good wife” submits to her husband (114). He refers to her hesitance as “foolishness” (114). Asana eventually concedes and a regular pattern of Osman demanding this mid-night request ensues. At the end of her pregnancy, “swollen, unbalanced, shivering,” and exhausted, Asana begs her husband to let her sleep, rather than stand relentlessly for him (115). At this, Osman kicks the pregnant Asana. He continues to physically abuse her, slapping and “aiming blows” at her (116). This pattern of violence continues in the marriage. Asana remains vulnerable to the abuse and loses herself in the marriage. She becomes so consumed with “a desperation to please” her husband and his family that she “did not even see it happening in herself” (125). She remains powerless to change her situation. As her own father explains during Asana’s temporary respite home, “a woman’s duty is to be with her husband in his home” (121). Asana was well aware of the fact that if she “ran away from her marriage,” she “could never go

home” (121). It was not socially acceptable for a West African woman, regardless of abuse, to abandon her husband.

In addition to relating her experiences as a West African woman enduring violence at the hands of a man, Asana’s story enlightens readers to the ways in which she is belittled as a human being. She represents value, not as a woman, but for domesticity, child bearing, and sexual pleasure. Osman expects Asana to look and act a certain way. When she fails to meet his expectations, he publicly humiliates her, “shaming” her for “the way she dresses, the fashion in which she styles her hair,” or the “expression on her face” (125). Asana is said to be “useless” because she is “no good in the kitchen” (125). Even while treated and devalued as such, Asana “behaves like a sleepwalker,” and continues to “treat Osman as a god” (125). She goes to his bed when called, remaining sexually available at his whim. Asana was treated by Osman “in any way he pleased” (127).

Even within her marriage, Asana is incapable of remaining safe. She feels sorry for herself and for her daughter, and with the help of another one of Osman’s wives, Ngadie, Asana is eventually able to escape from the marriage. In the end, after enduring these hardships, Asana marries again, out of love. After her second husband passes away, she starts a fabric business and lives happily and independently. Despite this seemingly happy outcome, according to local custom, Asana is referred to as a Mambore, or “woman who lived as a man” for the way

she chooses to live her life (247). Through Asana's life story, readers are given an insider's account of the experience of a West African woman: one of violence, oppression, debasement, and stigmatism.

Similarly, Abie's Aunt Mariama's story gives insight into the life of a woman that entails control and defeat at the hands of a man. This oppression is conveyed through the obliteration of Mariama's mother's religion. Her mother becomes mentally ill after being forced, by her husband, to forego her religion. As Mariama describes, women "changed their faith to marry and worshipped to please their husbands" (36). Her mother's religion consisted of ancestor stones. Each cherished stone represented a woman, a grandmother, or great-grandmother, and stood in memory of the woman: "Their spirits would be recalled each time the stone was held, warmed by a human hand, and cast on the ground to ask for help" (36). In the middle of the night, Mariama's mother is said to "plead" with her husband, "abasing" herself while "begging" and "praying" for him not to do away with her precious stones (55). She "groveled" on the ground, "reaching out to touch" her husband's feet (55). Despite her desperation, he "scattered the stones to the stars," symbolizing his disapproval of her religious tradition (56).

After Mariama's father had forced her mother to abandon the stones, her mother went insane and left her family. After years of longing for her mother and recollecting how her mother was forced to give up her religion at the hands of a man, Mariama realized how her "father had destroyed" her mother (56). In the

end, Mariama gives her niece Abie a stone, “heavy, warm and smooth” to begin her own ancestor stone collection (317). Mariama never marries, choosing a life of freedom rather than mirroring her mother’s downfall from being controlled by a man.

Mariama’s mother’s experiences not only depict a real violence through the control of her religion and therefore identity, but her story also shows the way she is negatively portrayed. After her ancestor stones were discarded by her husband, Mariama’s heartbroken mother is described as being “Craz-y” (51). She is a sad image, with “a tattered dress” and one exposed breast (51). She stares at her daughter, standing very still, until a group of boys begin to throw stones at her. The battered woman continues to be abused by males, all the while labeled as insane. She is the one that suffers, and yet she is belittled, marked as weak and mentally unstable.

Mariama’s own experiences are also ones of violence, oppression, and negative portrayal. After being given a scholarship by missionaries, Mariama travels to England to study to be a teacher. While she lives in her English hostel, racist locals believe that Mariama and her Black girlfriends steal. Black women are said to be in danger. In fact, a Black woman who “behaves” as the English girls do is murdered while “out alone at night” (204). While they found her body, “they never found who did it to her” (204). White girls moved away from Mariama, staring at her as though she was “something dreadful that never the less

compelled their gaze” (205). Fearful and intimidated in this racist and violent world, Mariama avoids being outside. She secludes herself in her dark and cold room for weeks on end. Eventually, she “starts to become confused” (204). In the end, she is brought to a psychiatric hospital and remains there until her sister Serah comes to bring Mariama back to Africa. Similar to her mother’s experiences, Mariama lives through extreme racism, cruel acts, and an eventually unfair and unflattering stigmatism. Both women are labeled as crazy, symbolizing an internally inferior and weak status. Yet, their struggles are a direct result of violence, pain, control, and racism inflicted upon them.

The story of Abie’s Aunt Hawa also exemplifies victimization. Hawa’s life depicts how West African women are the victims of violence not only at the hands of men, but also from medical professionals and other women. At the same time, as Hawa describes her experiences to her niece, she also conveys the negative representations that so often plagued West African women who are seen as petty, jealous, and competitive.

Hawa was socially stigmatized from birth. Her own mother, Tenkamu, was the sixth wife to her father, and was known to be the only truly chosen wife. For this reason, she was a source of jealousy for the other women. Uniquely, when Hawa’s father would visit Tenkamu, the pair would share their food. Tenkamu would “sit down next to” her husband and eat from the same dish, “like an equal” (60). Hawa’s father did not treat her mother as a slave. On the contrary,

he ensured that other women helped her. He would bring Tenkamu gifts when he traveled. As a result, the other jealous wives and women “bad-mouthed” Tenkamu (63). They “did not care” that Hawa heard them (63). They “did not let the presence of a child constrain their tongues” (64). They called her “the Madingo,” saying Hawa’s father never paid a bride price for her,” and that “she was given away for nothing like the bruised fruit at the end of market day” (64). Although Tenkamu and Hawa acted as though their status as outcasts did not affect them, the other women’s “narrowed eyes and twisted mouths surfaced” in their dreams (64). Their “spiteful words seeped” into their minds (64). The women were “Ores,” or co-wives. According to Hawa, this word “means rival” (65). Even after becoming ill and dying, Tenkamu receives ridicule and is the center of false rumors. As a result of seeing and hearing how the women treated her mother, Hawa is alienated and angry. These emotions, in combination with the death of her mother, lead Hawa to avenge the treatment of Tenkamu. To do this, Hawa freed the village’s fish just prior to fishing season. “Life hadn’t been fair to” Hawa, and even while young, she saw the cruelty that women can receive from other women, who are cruel, small-minded, and aggressive with one another (80).

Hawa herself did not live an easy life. She works extremely hard as a servant and is eventually betrothed to a slaughterhouse worker, with whom she has three sons. The couple conceives two daughters as well, but both die at birth.

During one of her deliveries, and without her approval, Hawa's doctor performs a tubal ligation. This act of violence toward Hawa haunts her for years to come. After her husband abandons her, Hawa enters a relationship with a younger man, Khalil. Since Hawa is unable to give him children, out of her love for him, she "sacrifices her own happiness for his sake" and finds him a second wife to bear children (191). Hawa greatly desires to have her own children with Khalil, and even travels to the city in search of the doctor to reverse her previous surgery. However, while desperate to find a way to start a family with the man she loves, he and his pregnant second wife abandon Hawa. Upon her return home, Hawa finds that "they left" her (199). Years later, with adult children, Hawa's life is no easier. She ends up living in a "displacement camp" throughout her middle years, waiting for and worrying about her sons, the youngest of which, Lansana, is a member of the army. She is proud of her children, especially of Lansana, but her life is one of apprehension and concern. In the end, Hawa not only saw firsthand the victimization of African women by other women, by male medical professionals, and at the hands of men, but she also exemplifies being abandoned, and much of her heartache stems from not being able to live up to what is valued in Black women—giving birth.

The story of Abie's fourth aunt, Serah, about her self and her mother, reveals both their lack of personal and political freedoms, and also the victimization in the form of psychological and physical violence. These women

are seen as guilty, controlled, and replaceable. Serah's life is as daunting as her sisters'. Men, society, and politics leave these women at a disadvantage both in opportunity and image.

As a child, Serah witnesses her mother accused of adultery. The elders in the community cry "Guilty!" at her mother (102). Serah's mother was innocent, but could not attest to her innocence because she was truly attracted to the man with whom she was accused of having relations. She could not deny adultery when asked because "in her heart, she had wished it" (103). The guilt and blame inflicted upon her led to her conviction. This, in combination with threats from her husband, left Serah's mother without any options other than pleading guilty to a crime she did not commit. She was controlled and manipulated, and her instilled shame prevented her from "swearing her innocence" (102).

Serah's upbringing held promise for her to grow into a stronger, more independent and capable Black woman. Yet, her experiences are similar to those of her mother. Even with her greater sense of confidence and drive for independence, Serah is eventually controlled by a man and later replaced in her marriage by one of her girlfriends. In addition, she is in the midst of obscene violence, at the hands of which she loses fellow women and finds her own life threatened.

She is raised by her grandmother, a woman who raises a full house of children and instills in Serah a true sense of love. Serah not only felt loved at

home, but she was also lucky enough to have Mrs. Silk as a teacher, a woman who “made Serah feel good in herself” (164). As a young schoolgirl, while dating a college-aged boy named Janneh, Serah becomes politically active. She works with him as a returning officer and “creates signatures” and finger prints with all of her fingers and “each of her toes to create fictional thumb prints,” fixing the polls in favor of a representative of the People’s Progress Party. Her promising upbringing continues when she meets a man named Ambrose in England. They later marry, and while living in England, he treats her with the respect of an equal. He allows her to smoke and promises to teach her to drive. Yet, as Serah’s story continues, her life begins to mimic that of her mother’s.

While in Africa later in their marriage, Ambrose refuses to allow Serah the freedoms to smoke, drive, or even to work. He eventually has an affair with one of Serah’s best friends and kicks Serah out of their home after she confronts the two of them. While in her late fifties, Serah continues her political activities. She is confronted with life-threatening danger while working the poll booths. Voters are attacked and killed all around her. Redempta, Serah’s political partner with whom she “chains herself to the ballot boxes” with, is eventually killed (279). Regardless of her positive experiences at home and school, Serah’s life is riddled with violence and victimization.

These women’s life stories exemplify the sexism, prejudice, and violence that pervade the lives of African women during and after British colonialism.

While Abie is given a full knowledge of her aunts' lives, we as readers are educated on the experiences of these West African women. Regardless of power of will, "Black women often stayed behind and died after a lifetime of wheedling and scraping" (Gurnah 118). Abie's aunts witness their mothers' downfalls and later struggle to free themselves from similar objectification, victimization, and belittlement.

While the texts discussed thus far depict historical struggles of African women, many pieces of Black British literature also address current difficulties. Contemporary times introduce new and equally complex moral and societal issues for Black British women. A central dilemma exists: "how to combine the past and the future—the Internet and the remnants of family life" (Morley and Robins 4). Along with increased liberation and acceptance of different lifestyles has come a "strident call for a return to 'family values'" (Morley and Robins 10). Black women must delicately balance their connection with their countries of origin and maintenance of familial traditions while at the same time adapting to the expectations of modern-day women. Currently, Black women are more likely to be confronted with modern-day oppressions, such as trying to maintain positive aspects of their heritage in changing times, rather than the victimization, outward control, and demeaning representations discussed thus far. Black British literature conveys these modern struggles for women as well. Forna's *Ancestor Stones*,

Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), and Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999) exemplify the more modern difficulties Black women face.

In *Ancestor Stones*, Abie's experiences depict the difficulty many Black women find in maintaining a sense of connection with their native countries and traditions after relocating and living in vastly different countries. Although Abie grows up in Africa, she immigrates to Britain to escape political upheaval, marries a Scottish man, and raises her family in London. It is only after being summoned by letter that Abie returns to Africa, and learns her personal history and roots through her aunts. Abie refers to the letter from her cousin Alpha as coming from "a place from which no letter had arrived for a decade or more" (5). This portrays Abie's long absence and disconnection from Africa. Abie refers to the way in which her cousin sent her letter: "Knowingly, he had denied me the opportunity to write back with ready excuses, to enclose a cheque bloated with guilty zeroes" (7). By referring to guilt, Abie shows that she feels she should be more connected to her home country, which has "her language," which she "had left long enough" (7-8). In addition, "knowingly" implies that Abie's African family members may have unsuccessfully attempted to bring her home to their country in the past (7). Abie refers to the country as seeming to have "disappeared...like the great unfilled spaces on old maps where once map makers drew illustrations of mythical beasts and untold riches" (5). This idea of phantasmal creatures and unknown valuables foreshadows what the country holds

for Abie. It is distant and unknown, but shelters Abie's personal history. Her situation portrays how many diasporic Black women feel about their heritage and home countries in modern times: Despite long periods of absence and a hesitancy to travel back, Abie is guilty for abandoning her cultural traditions and country. Africa seems almost intangible to Abie, but nonetheless, she sees its promise for self-exploration and reestablishment of roots.

By returning to Africa and exploring and discussing her aunts' memories, Abie forms a connection with her childhood, rediscovers her African culture, and matures. Returning to her home country, Abie remembers "how she used to watch" her "grandmothers leave their houses and make their way down the same path upon which she was standing, towards their gardens" (6). Through remembering and learning their stories, Abie completes her own journey home, down her own "path." The country literally welcomes her as the grass "reaches out to scratch" her bare ankles, a caterpillar descends on an invisible filament to twirl in front of her face, and a bat opens its "single eye" at her (10). The nature enveloping her signifies the embrace of the women of her family and country. They are indistinguishable. Abie cannot tell the difference between the humming of women and a "crane flying overhead" (10). Africa is shown to be Abie's home further when she notices the ear of an African boy: "The cartilage formed a small point in exactly the same place as it does on her son's ear" (11). This literal comparison shows how deeply connected Abie is with Africa. The people are her

own, the boys are her sons. For Abie, an actual uprooting from London and return to Africa is necessary for her to return to her heritage and introduce it back into her life. The trip and reconnection with her aunts instills in her a forgotten knowledge of the importance of maintaining her traditional background with her modern-day life. Abie maintains her life in London but strengthens the ongoing bond between herself and her aunts to sustain her heritage. She states that “every day, these women appear to me in my mind’s eye, my aunts in all their guises, often when I am least expecting it” (315). Abie carries these women with her, as they shape her, who she is, and who she wants to be. These women and their stories guide and provide knowledge as they bind families and women through a shared heritage.

The Buddha of Suburbia also presents an example of a Black woman struggling to sustain a sense of tradition in modern times. While Abie finds it difficult to remain connected with her home country and the heritage it holds while living in London, the woman in Kureishi’s novel struggles with attempting to stay true to family tradition while living outside of her family’s country of origin. It is a comedic novel that follows the life of a teenage Anglo-Indian boy, Karim. Karim’s cousin, Jamila, is exemplary of a Black woman trying to uphold familial tradition within a modern society.

Jamila is very progressive. As a young woman, she is well aware of the times and “always seems to be leaning forward, arguing, persuading” (51). She is

well educated, having received “the highest-class education” (52). Admittedly, she is “more advanced than” Karim “in every way” (52). She is aware of her culture, commenting on how Indian “families aren’t sacred, especially to Indian men, who talk about nothing else and act otherwise” (55). She does not uphold traditional expectations of Indian women. For instance, she partakes in a sexual relationship with Karim, both out of wedlock and without any sort of commitment or emotional bond.

Despite living a rather modern lifestyle, Jamila is eventually asked to marry an Indian man chosen by her father. To convince his more modernized daughter to marry, her father goes on a hunger strike, using guilt and worry to pressure his daughter into submitting to his wishes. Even when told what an outdated and “old-fashioned” request this was to make of his daughter, Jamila’s father remains unyielding and replies that “this is our way...our way is firm. She must do what I say or I will die. She will kill me” (60). In the end, Jamila does marry the man her father chose for her, an overweight, lazy, and crippled man, who sees prostitutes when his young wife refuses to go to bed with him. Her husband, Changez, is disappointed to learn that his marriage is one of force. Jamila, unhappily being forced to uphold a familial tradition as a modern Black woman, refuses to ever consummate the marriage and lives for years with Changez as nothing more than a roommate, regardless of his eventual romantic love for her. Later, the married couple move into a house full of progressives and

Jamila, in an attempt to live her own independent life, has a baby with a man other than her husband. Yet, Changez stands by her and takes care of the “communal baby,” stating that he has “never been so happy” (231). He continues this relationship even when Jamila starts a lesbian relationship after the baby is born.

Jamila’s mid-life choices are indeed revolutionary and far from traditional. Yet, she both married to please her Indian father and also submitted to his choice of marriage partner. This fictional story is sensational, but it raises the dilemma of how a British-born daughter of South Asian immigrants fulfills her own modern desires and lifestyle while at the same time being forced to stay true to her family, culture, and heritage. Just as Abie in *Ancestor Stones* must find a way to stay connected with her heritage while living a modern lifestyle, Jamila must attempt to live her progressive lifestyle while incorporating her family’s traditions. This is not an easy task for either woman. These struggles are different from the historical and more horrific sufferings of Black women, but they are specific complexities nonetheless.

Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee exemplifies a contemporary dilemma for Black diasporic women with regard to maintaining tradition in the face of modernity: the work and family conflict. Current-day Black women are expected to simultaneously uphold the conflicting roles of traditional mother and modern career woman. Black women in particular are valued only as the “lynch pins” of

Black family life, when they are “superwomen,” excelling in “educational attainment and career success, while still finding the time to rear children single-handedly” (Mirza 97). The “Black superwoman” creates a world where in order to be valued, women must either literally be superhuman in their balancing of work and family or remain devalued. Yet, “balancing career and family seems to be a particularly difficult challenge for women of color” (Hewlett 88). A smaller percentage of nonwhite “high-achieving women” have children than white “high-achieving women” (88). Minority women must work harder and longer to establish themselves in the business world, which lends itself to more years of postponing childbearing. As time goes on, more and more education is needed to succeed in the majority of careers, which has caused younger generations of women to have an even “harder time balancing work and family than their older sisters” (Hewlett 90). The difficulties young white women face on the “work/family front” are more severe for young Black women. The trade-offs between career and children affect all races and both sexes, but “if high-altitude careers inevitably exact a price, it is profoundly unfair that the highest prices—by far! —are paid by women,” and more specifically, Black women (Hewlett 120).

Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee captures this “highest price” for Black women in its representation of three women of Indian ancestry living in London. Chila, Tania, and Sunita are best friends living very different lives. Yet, all are caught between two cultures—their Indian heritage and modern Britain. This is

particularly visible in the choices the women make with regard to work, marriage, and families.

Chila symbolizes the traditional Indian woman with regard to marriage and children. She saves herself for marriage, which she calls “proper” (31) and stops working once married. She spends all of her time decorating her house, “organizing her cupboards and drawers,” cooking, and happily “catching up on the chat shows” (34). She wakes up to make her husband “some tea and toast in the morning and to watch the sleep flake away from his eyes” (35). Chila is the epitome of the dutiful, traditional stay-at-home wife. Even when she later sees her husband kissing another woman, she stays loyal and convinces herself that “alcohol makes people do silly things” (190). Regardless of his fidelity, she becomes pregnant and starts a family.

Tania’s character contrasts with Chila in that her life opposes that of a traditional Indian woman. She rebuffs her Indian heritage, physically and emotionally distancing herself from her family, and chooses to avoid marriage and children. Instead, she focuses on her career while living with and engaging in a relationship with a white man. Even in her career, she struggles to evade being typified as an Indian film maker, preferring to stand alone as a successful female artist. Tania looks at her friends’ lives, with husbands and children, with disgust. She refers to them “stepping over the threshold, the Armani suit shrinks and crumples away, the pencil skirt feels blowsy and tight, the head bows, the

shoulders sag, within a minute they are basting and baking and burning fingers over a hot griddle, they are soothing children and saying sorry, bathing in-laws and burning with guilt” (145). This transformation that accompanies marrying, “the most frightening and speedy one since Jekyll and Hyde,” disturbs Tania and fuels her choice to enter romantic relationships outside of marriage and to avoid having children (145).

As a child, Sunita questions her family about women and their place in society. In a conversation with her uncle about whether women could be priests, he calls her a “silly girl” and ends up walking away from her (76). As Sunita explains, this “was some sort of turning point” for her (76). She learned that in her culture, girls and women were inferior: “Men would enter the house and sit, playing cards, waiting to be served while the women ran in clucking circles around them” (80). Yet, she pursues her education with full intentions to have a career. In the end, however, Sunita falls in love with her eventual husband and “failed all of her exams” while her soon-to-be husband “sailed through his” (87). It is only later in her life, when she is a wife and mother of two that she begins to focus on a career again.

In the end, all three women are unhappy in their life choices. Chila, representative of traditional Indian women, realizes that her house, “created from catalogue clippings and blobby paste,” and her marriage are façades. Tania, the epitome of a modern Londoner rebelling from her Indian heritage, learns that she

actually wants more from life than her career, eventually reconnecting with her family through her dying father and questioning the love between a mother and child. She asks herself whether it is “possible to love without expecting anything back” and ponders if this is what people “feel for their children” (327). The real message of the novel comes in Sunita’s transformation. She eventually recognizes the value in her current situation (no life alterations necessary). She commits to improving her marriage, solidifying her life as wife, mother, and career woman.

Sunita’s character lies between the extremes of Chila and Tania. She did give up her career to focus entirely on family, but she chose to have a career nonetheless. She epitomizes what is valued most in modern society for Black women—doing it all; being both the domestic and career oriented “lynch pins” of Black family life (Mirza 97). Through these three women of Indian origin and their experiences, Syal exemplifies the idea that to be happy, women must combine tradition with progressiveness and with regard to work and family, balance them both with skill. To be one or the other (Chila or Tania) will lead to unhappiness. As Chila, Tania, and Sunita’s characters exemplify, meeting this modern Black “superwoman” ideal does not come easy (Hewlett 303). Sunita’s character seems to eventually have it all, but her journey in getting there is far from simple. In addition, Syal ends the novel with Sunita’s realization that in order to be fulfilled, she must combine being a mother and upholding a career.

Yet, she does not show Sunita's success at mastering both simultaneously. As the experiences of Chila and Tania show, Black women tend to choose one extreme or the other—the traditional life of a woman of her heritage or the modern life of a woman local to the country in which she dwells. Therefore, as Syal's novel illustrates, being expected to hold both traditional and modern roles (mother and career woman) is a difficult and complex position for Black women to be in.

The male and female-authored pieces of Black British literature herein take place in very different time periods and locations around the world. Yet, each work shares a common theme: The contemporary Black British writers illustrate either past or current oppressions of Black women. Whether objectified, victimized, negatively portrayed, or facing modern dilemmas, the depicted Black female characters represent the experiences of Black women over time. The works of Dabydeen, Forna, Gurnah, Kureishi, and Syal stand as important avenues of the past *or* current Black female experience. Yet, when analyzed together, these pieces of contemporary Black British literature take on a powerful role: witness to both the historical *and* modern challenges of Black women.

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