



Summer Reading List

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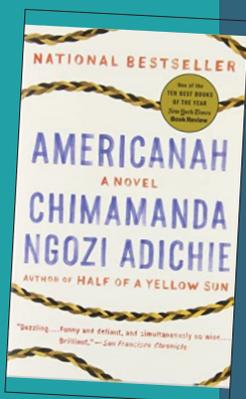
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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*, 2013

Daniel Alexander

“My suggestion,
to create a
trio of modern
diasporic female
perspectives;

Americanah is about
a Nigerian student in
the United States and
Lagos and the difficulties of coming
to terms with what has become an
alien and imagined “home”



Foreword

Daniel Alexander, *Old Bedalian* (1976–82)



The death of George Floyd, the man suffocated to death by the police in the US, and the publicity surrounding the recent deaths of a number of other African-American men and women has promoted an outpouring of sadness, solidarity and anger. Among the many horrific aspects of the event, one of the most striking is that it was filmed. That footage, and the consequences that flowed from it, have made aspects of the daily lived experience of particularly many African-Americans manifest and has made certain truths undeniable and certain stances untenable.

The impact on educational institutions both in the UK and in the US has been profound. One example: as recently as 2016, one of the great Ivy League colleges in the US, Princeton University, voted to retain the name of its school of international relations: the Woodrow Wilson School. Woodrow Wilson was a revered President of Princeton who transformed it from a sleepy second-rate college into one of the leading universities in the world. Wilson became President of the United States, was a key figure in the founding of the League of Nations and won a Nobel Prize. Who could be worthier of having a school of international relations named after him?

Yet on Saturday, Princeton decided to remove his name from one of its most prominent institutions. Woodrow Wilson had been resolutely opposed to African-American attendance at Princeton and played a large role in actively re-segregating parts of the US Government that had been de-segregated. All the facts known on Saturday were known four years ago. So what changed?

The public and filmed killing of George Floyd, witnessed and whose witnessing was in turn witnessed around the world has released a flood of recognition – or perception. Those familiar with the plays of Arthur Miller – like many other great works of the literature of transformative recognition – know that truths, like misfortunes, never come singly. The fact of seeing – and being seen to have seen – previously unrecognised things changes the perception of much else. The German word for “perception” is “Wahrnehmung” – literally “taking something to be true”. At such moments of perception, the truth has not changed but what is taken to be true has. Certain facts, certain kinds of lives and ways of being which have been less recognised, less entitled are suddenly in sharper relief and can no longer be overlooked. Part of doing justice involves truthful recognition of aspects of culture and community present but unseen. It requires a dispassionate understanding of the lives of families

and communities unjustly dispossessed of freedom and prosperity and of families and communities unjustly enriched from the lives of others.

Many educational institutions have been realising that their frames of reference need some adjustment to take in truths about culture and cultures not universally acknowledged. They have been looking more intently at what has been overlooked. Bedales is no exception.

I was a student at Bedales many years ago (1976-82) and later a Governor. My family is partly Ghanaian and partly German Jewish. By and large, I think the staff (and some students) do a good job – and increasingly so in recent years – in encouraging those at the school to look outwards and take a real interest in a range of cultural perspectives. However, it is not easy to turn every Bedalian head in that direction.

Students are largely from affluent families. Some have a correlate belief in their own entitlement. The school is less ethnically and socially mixed than some and many staff and students are – as I was – from an untroubled and leafy corner of the South East. Aspects of the daily experience of many in the UK, let alone minority communities here or further afield, do not impinge greatly. This gives rise to a risk of insularity. However, recent events have changed the extent to which certain kinds of perception – or lack of perception – are acceptable and, among other things, correspondence from some past and current students suggests an increasing appetite for a broader view.

Having been locked in, this summer is a good moment to look out. That is where this reading list comes in. It is not comprehensive but it has a number of different, largely historical, windows into some areas of lives less often explored. They provide ways of understanding some background, since aspects of this history are often neither dead nor even past. Understanding them is no less important than having a grip on the core canon of (say) French or Russian literature.

The list starts with Magnus' choice of Derek Walcott's poems. It is particularly fitting since, as well as being a poet of international standing, Walcott was an accomplished painter. Although more of a successor to the later modernists, one of his longer poems was influenced by Greek epic and lyrical verse and makes a good comparative read for those studying (say) Virgil and Catullan epics. *Orientalism*, by one of

the most famous literary critics of the last century, Edward Said, has at its heart an analysis of how the exotic in "foreign" cultures are represented and perceived in arts and humanities. Said was, among other things, a pianist and passionate supporter of Palestinian rights. He created a magnificent Arab-Israeli orchestra with his close friend, the Jewish conductor Daniel Barenboim as a way of bridging (or rendering irrelevant) by music apparently irreconcilable territorial and cultural claims. Barenboim described it as "a project against ignorance". One might say that *Orientalism* is that too in its own way – and in the words of Tony Just, the historian, it continues to generate "irritation, veneration and imitation" many years after its publication.

Things Fall Apart is one of the classics of the colonial novel written in the 1950s by one of the masters of Nigerian literature Chinua Achebe. It is not only a great novel in itself but is a sort of counterpoint to the "Imperial gaze" criticised by Said. One of Achebe's successors said of it that it is "the first novel in English which spoke from the interior of the African character, rather than portraying the African as an exotic, as the white man would see him." That characterisation, by a famous African writer, now seems anachronistic with its presumption that there is or ever was such a thing as an "African character".

The Battle for Algiers and *Xala* (Sembène) in some ways go together – since they are both about elements of Francophone colonial experience – but they could not be more different. *The Battle* is a documentary style of the minutiae – street by street – of the independence war in a French North African colony directed by an Italian director. *Xala* is also a fictional account of the state of another nation, Senegal, but after independence.

More recently, women's voices have reflected both a changed perception and subject matter. There has also been an increasing focus on the British Caribbean, African and South Asian diaspora. Two very different works, Andrea Levy's *Small Island* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* combine the two perspectives and are great places to start with this. Levy's work focusses on the experience of Caribbean families coming to the UK – and *Brick Lane* on the Bangladeshi community in London. Since I have been asked to write a foreword I will exercise *droit*

d'auteur and add another suggestion to create a trio of modern diasporic female perspectives: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* (2013) about a Nigerian student in the United States and Lagos and the difficulties of the coming to terms with what has become an alien and imagined "home".

Some suggestions may be controversial. Please don't blame those who have provided these suggestions if your favourite is not here – or pet hates are. Instead, write in to externalrelations@bedales.org.uk with ideas for the next one. Don't blame them for omitting history, politics or economics, art, architecture, design or science. They will be the subject of other lists.

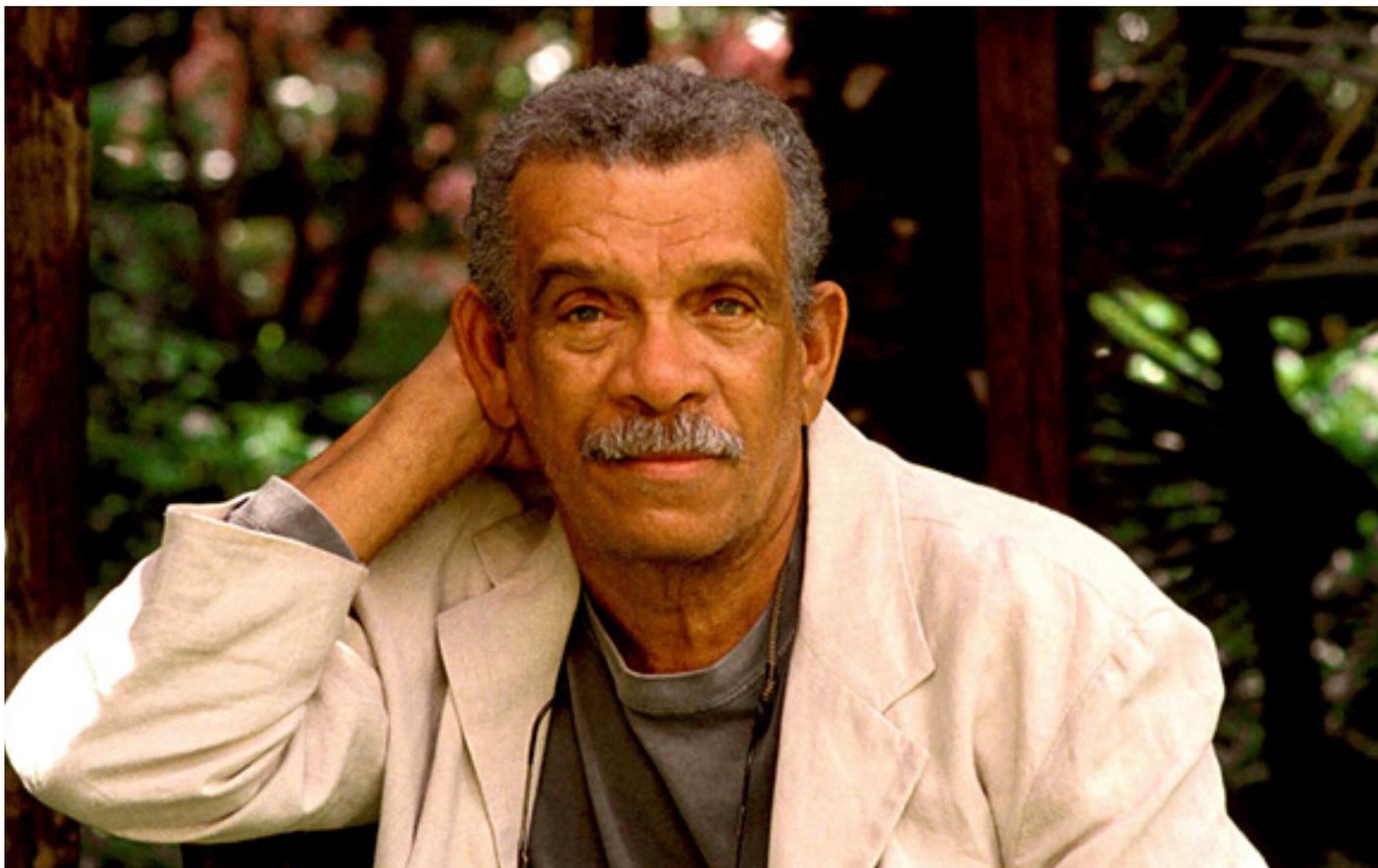
As to the latter, at Bedales, I tended to sciences and took a degree in Physics and Philosophy at Oxford. I later studied law at Harvard and am now a barrister and part-time judge. So it seems fitting to end with something from a celebrated African-American mathematician who died in 2010 aged 91. Professor David Blackwell, was born to a poor family in Illinois where his father was a railroad worker. He had finished his first maths degree at 19, an age when most people are just starting theirs – and had to work part-time to pay for it.

As an indication of what academics like him were up against at that time, he was invited as a researcher to the Institute of Advanced Study, where Einstein – another person excluded from educational institutions in his home country to preserve their racial purity – later worked. The IAS was affiliated with Princeton and researchers could use its facilities and go to its lectures. But not if one was African-American – thanks to those who shared Woodrow Wilson's approach. Many years later, Blackwell became Chair of the Department at the University of California at Berkeley where he had previously been refused a post, it is reported, because the wife of the faculty head did not want to have a "darkie" for dinner. He had words of advice which apply just as much to a summer reading list as to scientific research: keep trying different things, try to find something you like and don't worry about its overall importance: "there's a sufficient correlation between interest and importance."

I hope you will find something to interest you on this list. Happy reading.

Derek Walcott, *Selected Poems 2007*

Magnus Bashaarat, Head of Bedales



Derek Walcott: 1930-2017

Derek Walcott was born and died in St Lucia, but during his life he journeyed poetically, intellectually and physically all around the world. St Lucia was governed either by the French or British from 1660, when the French signed a treaty with the indigenous Caribs, until 1979, when it achieved full independence from Britain.

Some of Walcott's poems refer back to the involvement of islands in what is now called the West Indies with the triangular slave trade. In *A Far Cry from Africa*, one of his early poems, the white justification for subjugation and slaughter of Africans is brutally rehearsed:

*Statistics justify and scholars seize
The salients of colonial policy.
What is that to the white child
hacked in bed?*

*To savages, expendable as Jews?
In Ruins of a Great House we meet
some of those naval 'heroes' who
'discover' new countries and bring back
exotic plunder:*

*I thought next
Of men like Hawkins, Walter Raleigh,*

Drake,

*Ancestral murderers and poets,
more perplexed*

*In memory now by every ulcerous
crime.*

The Almond Trees quotes the often cited western European judgement about cultures, peoples and civilisations who don't build palaces, castles, opera houses or country estates as monuments to people. How did indigenous people in Australia express and curate their cultural history if they didn't have any buildings? It must mean they were primitive.

*There's nothing here
This early;
Cold sand
Cold churning ocean, the Atlantic,
No visible history,*

The long poem *The Schooner, Flight to the Casuarinas*, which explores the power of the naming of things – specifically trees – as an act of colonial appropriation. When I lived in Australia I remember being surprised by the

number of plants there were which came under the umbrella *Banksia*, 170 in a genus. Joseph Banks was at Eton, and used his family fortune to fund a seven year voyage on the Endeavour which in 1770 dropped anchor in what was named Botany Bay, now a suburb of Sydney.

“How did indigenous people in Australia express and curate their cultural history if they didn't have any buildings? It must mean they were primitive

The [Natural History Museum at Eton](#), which is an amazing archive and resource, encourages us to 'Follow in the eighteenth century footsteps of legendary botanist Joseph Banks as he discovers Australia', which might have been a surprise to the indigenous peoples who had been living there for 40,000 years.

Edward Saïd, *Orientalism* 1978

Haroon Shirwani, Head of Arabic, Eton College

I read Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* while doing A Levels in a bid to push myself and have something to talk about in university interviews. Perhaps I should say I experienced it more than 'read' it. Whole pages went over my head like particularly subtle movements in a symphony. (Saïd was also a musician and friends with the Israeli maestro Daniel Barenboim.) But the main melodies and rhythms caught me. And they have continued to help me make sense of the world ever since.

The overriding theme of *Orientalism* is simple: when we Europeans and Americans talk about the 'orient' or the 'east', we are talking about a place that exists only in our minds. This is a construct, a made-up place where we may locate our fantasies and fears, where the heat is hotter, where the blood is redder, where all is extremes. The people are part of the scenery; they are picturesque and quaint, good for postcards and pictures to hang up at home. We emphasise the things that make them different to us. The most spectacular images or the crudest representations – Aladdin, Bruce Lee films, Apu from the *The Simpsons* – make the deepest impression. We lose nuance. We sacrifice recognition of what we have in common. We overlook people's everyday preoccupations and we define them by their governments and their headlines. We ignore their right to be as boring as we are. And the result? We turn a whole part of the world into a setting for adventures and a source of characters to entertain or scare us.

“*Orientalism and its lessons: to scrutinise the power dynamics in any situation; and to take apart the constructs in our minds which condition how we perceive others*”

Orientalism takes on entire professions – foreign correspondents, travel writers, professors of oriental studies – dedicated to venturing into alien cultures and representing them to



Syria: Harbour, painted by Bedales founder John Badley, 'good for postcards and pictures to hang up at home'

us. It ties their work to the imbalance of power between 'west' and 'east'. This imbalance was more obvious when the British and French empires were at their height, and writers, scholars, artists and missionaries would literally travel with colonising soldiers. But even now, it is possible to be blind to the privileges of a colonial legacy which allows us to travel widely and find our native languages spoken in most places. We confuse being comparatively wealthy and privileged and fluent in a world language with being cleverer. We decide we understand people and can explain their ways.

The book has its critics. Legions of them. Since *Orientalism's* publication in 1978, academics have lined up to find fault with the examples it uses or accuse it of dealing in generalisations. It's true, for example, that the main hub of oriental studies in nineteenth century Europe was in Germany, which did not have an empire in the east. So German orientalists could not be accused of working hand in hand with imperial forces in the same way as those from Britain or France could.

But Edward Saïd's main contribution stands to this day: he started a conversation which we are still having now, back and forth across different sections and levels of society, working

out how power and culture interact, and identifying how different kinds of privilege affect the way a person represents the world to themselves and others. The Black Lives Matter movement indicates that we are still getting to grips with how to have this conversation. Yes, most people now understand that Africa is not a county. Yes, we are moving on from the idea that the middle east is the land of Bible stories and Sindbad the Sailor and little else of note. Yes, the stereotypes in Indiana Jones movies would be unthinkable today (one hopes). And yes, we now have bookshops and documentaries filled with stories and analyses presented by real people from these supposedly 'exotic' societies. But we keep seeing new cases which show us there is still so much work to be done. Right now, revelations are pouring out from the worlds of fashion and music and drama in which artists from ethnic minorities are opening up about how they could only get ahead if they hid their otherness or if they conformed to a stereotype. So we are reminded once again of Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* and its lessons: to scrutinise the power dynamics in any situation; and to take apart the constructs in our minds which condition how we perceive others.

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 1958

Magnus Bashaarat, Head of Bedales

Things Fall Apart was one of the first novels written by an African writer to be published in Britain, in English, and as such has an enduring status as archetypal modern African novel. In this book Achebe sets his story in pre-colonial Nigeria amongst the Igbo, and as its centre is the Okonkwo, a man of status and wrestling champion within the Umuofia people. The British missionaries arrive in the second half of the novel, and colonial administrators soon after that. The first encounters between colonisers and colonized are described, and thereafter the Igbo way of life eroded.

Achebe followed *Things Fall Apart* with *No Longer at Ease* in 1960, and *Arrow of God* in 1964, which completed a trilogy of novels that examine the clash between British colonial culture and traditional culture, and in particular the deracination of Igbo culture, a conflict that being played out across British colonies in East Africa and the Indian subcontinent.

Ian Duhig's poem *Fundamentals* captures with comic and satiric skill the imagined moment when religious and

cultural superiority is asserted with the help of a rifle:

*Brethren, I know that many of you
have come here today
because your chief has promised any
non-attender
that he will stake him out, drive tent-
pegs through his anus
and sell his wives and children to the
Portuguese.
As far as possible, I want you to put
that from your minds.
Today, I want to talk to you about the
Christian God.*

*In many respects, our Christian God is
not like your God.
His name, for example, is not also our
word for rain.
Neither does it have for us the
connotation 'sexual intercourse'.
And although I call Him 'holy' (we call
Him 'Him', not 'It',
even though we know He is not a man
and certainly not a woman)
I do not mean, as you do, that He is
fat like a healthy cow.*

*Let me make this
clear. When I say
'God is good, God
is everywhere',
it is not
because He is
exceptionally fat.
'God loves you'
does not mean what warriors do to
spear-carriers on campaign.
It means He feels for you like your
mother or your father -
yes I know Chuma loved a son he
bought like warriors
love spear-carriers on campaign -
that's 'Sin' and it comes later.*

*From today, I want you to remember
just three simple things:
our God is different from your God,
our God is better than your God
and my wife doesn't like it when you
watch her go to the toilet.
Grasp them and you have grasped the
fundamentals of salvation.
Baptisms start at sundown but before
then, as arranged,
how to strip, clean and re-sight a bolt-
action Martin-Henry.*



Gillo Portecorvo, *The Battle of Algiers* 1966

Tristan Wilson, Head of Modern Languages, Bedales

Italian film director Gillo Portecorvo set about making a neutral film narrating a realistic account of the struggles of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) and the Algerian population against their French colonisers. The film is set during the Algerian War and focuses on the rise of the FLN and its guerrilla

tactics employed within the Casbah of Algiers and the response of the French military led by a merciless Lieutenant Colonel Mathieu.

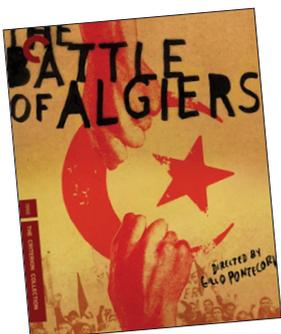
Following

WWII the myth France had cultivated of itself in relation to its colonised countries as a superior power had disintegrated. Having put up with the ruthless French colonial policy of assimilation and the loss of native culture that was brought with it, Algeria had reached a 'nothing to lose' boiling point.

Early scenes in the film depict reprisal bombings where the FLN begin their policy of indiscriminate killing in the European sector, two at cafés frequented by Pied-noirs. The narrative weaves on in Portecorvo's newsreel style with scenes of violence committed by the FLN and torture committed by the French under Mathieu. Portecorvo gambled by having mainly non-professional actors in his film using

predominantly Algerian locals, some of whom were FLN members, most notably Saadi Yacef, who helped write the screenplay for the film and later became an Algerian senator. Even the lead professional actor, Jean Martin, who plays Mathieu had experience of combat in Indochina and Portecorvo's gamble certainly pays off giving the film a great degree of realism.

The Battle of Algiers is a must for anybody interested in colonial history but more importantly it is a film which helps us understand so much about French society today and the hypocrisy of some of France's right wing politicians, who fear the presence of a culture that had been so ruthlessly suppressed a generation before.



Sembène Ousmane, *Xala* 1975

Tristan Wilson, Head of Modern Languages, Bedales



Xala opens at the chamber of commerce where a group of native Senegalese businessmen are congratulating themselves on the fact that they have finally taken over the institution from the colonial powers. We are introduced to El Hadji Abdoukader Beye, one of the businessmen, who was originally a teacher until he started trading items extorted from the poor such as land and rice. El Hadji is to marry his third wife, as is permitted by Islam but following the lavish wedding reception he lays on, and under pressure from his new wife's aunt, he suffers from erectile dysfunction (*xala* in Wolof), the result of a curse from someone of his entourage according to a village marabout. The narrative then follows El Hadji on a quest to find out who had cursed him and to try to lift the curse, which comes at the cost of his dignity, wealth and status.

Sembène wrote about the struggles of the minorities in France and the black workers in Senegal in his early works, drawn largely from his experiences in both of these countries and he has been compared to an African version of Émile Zola. *Xala* is a little different in that it focuses on the African elite, the ones who claim to be the liberators but who simply behave in the same way as the colonisers did, exploiting the poor African as the businessmen did to make their fortunes. The hypocrisy is highlighted further by their insistence on speaking French, the language of the colonials. El Hadji even loses his temper with

one of his daughters, Rama, when she refuses to speak French to him but later the tables are turned when El Hadji faces his judgement at a hearing in the chamber of commerce and he is forbidden from speaking in his native Wolof and reminded that 'we are businessmen, not babies.' El Hadji cuts an absurd figure; having refused to follow the tradition of sitting on a giant pestle and mortar before his wedding night he then tries modern medicine and then out of further desperation journeys out to nearby impoverished villages to see marabouts, seeking help from those he has cheated, throwing money at everyone whilst insisting on only drinking Evian. Whilst *Xala* does not explore African traditional values as much as African works of the magic realist genre the fact that the 'xala' is generally accepted by the narrator to be a curse shows a belief in and attachment to those values.

“Xala shows us the plight of the impoverished population after decades of having been suppressed and assimilated”

The theme of tradition versus modernity is also presented in the difference between El Hadji's first two wives; the first converted to Islam in order to marry him and follows traditional ways, speaking Wolof at home and accepting that El Hadji is taking a third wife, whereas the second,

who spends her days lounging in French furniture browsing French fashion magazines is on the offensive, making sure she gets as much money from El Hadji as she can before his demise. Sembène also gives us a good insight into the cohabitation of traditional beliefs and Islam. El Hadji picks and chooses the parts of religion and tradition that suit him; the entitlement to take a third wife, the status of the 'Hadji' whereas he never seems to pray or go to the mosque and has alcohol as part of the stock he trades.

Women play an important role in *Xala* in a society which is male dominated. El Hadji is the head of three families but is bossed around by his second wife, his third wife's aunt and his first wife's daughter (the only figure doing anything to fight against the loss of culture and language in the book). Set against this context, one understands why his 'xala' and his quest to relinquish his 'manhood' become so important to him.

Sembène's criticism of the tide of African elites to fill in the hole left by the colonial oppressors is clear, but *Xala* shows us the plight of the impoverished population after decades of having been suppressed and assimilated. Ironically Sembène's works were written in French in order to sell to a more global market but he backed up his literary work with the medium of film to make it more accessible to those for whom it shows solidarity. For a highly entertaining foray into African literature in the postcolonial context I would recommend this book.

Andrea Levy, *Small Island* 2004

Helena Alexander, Bedales 6.2 leaver



The National Theatre's 2019 adaptation of 'Small Island'

Small Island portrays the lives of four characters, Hortense and Gilbert arrive in England from Jamaica after World War 2 and lodge with Queenie who is married to Bernard. Gilbert knows Queenie from his time in England during the war. Andrea Levy uses these characters to explore issues of race and identity in post war England. She shows how racism was a part of everyday life, even after a war that fought against racial prejudice. During the war the British state calls on Jamaicans to fight for the Mother Country from a strong sense of patriotism, however after the war, colonialist behaviour reappears and Jamaicans who immigrate to Britain are made to feel alienated and victims of overt and subtle racism. One of the characters who is most frustrated by this betrayal is Gilbert, as he realises

that his idea of the Mother Country is not the reality. Gilbert and Hortense cling to an idea of England that turns out to be false.

Even though Levy portrays the ugly side to everyday racism, she also shows how divisions can be broken down through acts of friendship and love. Andrea Levy shows what happened to the Windrush Generation when they arrived in England. The Jamaican characters coming to England think they will be welcomed and valued, but they meet prejudice and hostility. *Small Island* is such an important novel as it shows how painful any form of prejudice is and how destructive.

Small Island is relevant to the current BLM movement as we are having more conversations about race and racism within society. Levy looks at the history of racism in this country and how it

prevents people from seeing each other as individuals. Levy's comment on 'shared history' (from an interview she gave in 2004) between white people and black people shows that this can only be built on mutual respect.

“Even though Levy portrays the ugly side to everyday racism, she also shows how divisions can be broken down through acts of friendship and love

The BLM movement is about recognition for the prejudice and suffering that individuals and communities have suffered over the generations and to continue to suffer.

Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* 2003

Magnus Bashaarat, Head of Bedales



Monica Ali's debut novel was well received by the mainstream white media, but the reception amongst the Bangladeshi community it presented was more complicated. The tension experienced amongst immigrants to the UK between integration and assimilation, or articulating and celebrating their own cultural and religious values, is explored from the perspective of Nazneen through her arranged marriage to the hapless Chanu.

Chanu begins the novel feeling a sense of belonging, expressing optimism about British values and way of life, and showing that he knows what it means to 'be British'. In discussion with Dr Azad he declares, "Back home, if you drink you risk being an outcast. In London, if you don't drink you risk the same thing. That's when it becomes

dangerous, and when they start so young they can easily end up alcoholic." 'Back home' is a classic postcolonial trope, and expresses Chanu's cultural hybridity as a British Bangladeshi. It's this area of tension, between where people live and where they are from, where they feel 'homed' that the novel explores. Chanu joins Dr Azad's wife in drinking a beer (he is a Muslim), and so his descent in his wife's esteem begins. Mrs Azad's view on alienation and assimilation are clearer, "Fact: we live in a Western society. Fact: our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact; that's no bad thing."

Nazneen's sister, Hasina, maintains continuous letter writing from Bangladesh, and her unhappy narrative 'back home' contrasts with Nazneen's safer, more materially comfortable life

in Tower Hamlets. But of course, it's not that simple.

“‘Back home’ is a classic postcolonial trope, and expresses Chanu’s cultural hybridity as a British Bangladeshi

The final line of the novel, "This is England," she said. "You can do whatever you like," might look like affirmative and optimistic, but 17 years on from its publication, with displaced people, refugees and asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq and sub-Saharan Africa also now competing for a safe space to live in Britain's cities, the tensions remain unresolved.