

London Taxi Driver

BY DAVID DABYDEEN

honk dytte
 swerve dreje
 tub bølge, balje
 jerk rykke, støde
 solitary ensom
 the pools det engelske
 tips (spil)
 mount bestige
 design ide, plan
 light trafiklys
 slam hamre
 snatch gribe, hapse
 throb dunke, pulserer
 giddy svimmel, ør
 eller løbsk, kåd
 anticipation forvent-
 ning
 meter taxameter
 Berbice del af Guyana
 (for British Guyana).
 I kolonitiden var det
 den britiske politik i
 Guyana, at hinduer
 ikke kunne bestride
 civile hverv for de
 havde konverteret til
 kristendommen
 mule muldyr

David Dabydeen is a poet, novelist and critic. He was born in 1955 in Berbice, Guyana, the descendant of "coolies", i.e. hired labourers recruited from India. In 1969, at the age of thirteen, he moved to England with his parents. He studied English at Cambridge University and is now a Professor of English Literature at the University of Warwick.

His writings deal with the colonial and postcolonial conditions in the West Indies as well as themes of immigration in Britain. Dabydeen asserts that Caribbean culture has become a part of British culture because of the history of colonialism and postcolonial immigration: "over the centuries our cultures have become so interwoven that you can't be a Guyanese without being a Brit, and you can't be a Brit without being a Guyanese, or a Caribbean".

From Tooting, where I picked him up, to Waterloo,

He honked, swerved and swore,

Paused at the twin-tubbed buttocks of High Street Wives,

Jerked forward again,

Unwound the window as we sped along,

Hawked and spat.

The talk was mostly solitary,

Of the new single, of missing the pools by bleeding two,

Of some sweet bitch in some soap serial,

How he'd like to mount and stuff her lipstick mouth,

His eyes suddenly dreamy with designs -

Nearly missing a light he slammed the car stop,

Snatched the hand-brake up.

Wheel throbbed in hand, engine giddy with anticipation.

As we toured the slums of Lambeth the meter ticked greedily.

He has come far and paid much for the journey

From some village in Berbice where mule carts laze

And stumble over broken paths,

Past the women with buckets on their heads puffed

With ghee and pregnancy,

Past the men slowly bent over earth, shovelling,

Past the clutch of mud huts jostling for the shade,

Their Hindu flags of folk defiant rituals

That provoked the Imperial swords of Christendom

Discoloured, hang their heads and rot

On bamboo pikes:

Now he knows more the drama of amber red and green,

Mutinies against double-yellow lines,

His aggression is horned like ancient clarions,

He grunts rebellion

In back seat discount sex

With the night's last whore.

(1988)

ghee indisk stegemid-
 del
 clutch kobling
 jostle mase, skubbe
 Hindu flag hindu
 bedeflag (på bam-
 busstænger)
 folk folkelig
 defiant lydigheds-
 nægtende
 pike lanse, spid, stang
 amber gul
 double-yellow lines
 vejstriber i England,
 "parkering forbudt"
 horned hornet, horn-
 bærende (med ref. til
 det mandlige lem)
 clarion fanfare
 grunt stønne

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

KEY WORDS AND PHRASES BOX

- Second-class citizen, coolie, the underprivileged, indentured labourer
- Psychological strain, aggression, frustration, impatience, restlessness
- Sexism, chauvinism, moral corruption/ disintegration, depravity
- Solitude, loneliness, anonymity, alienation, estrangement
- Cultural heritage/ baggage, place of origin, homeland
- Oppression, coercion, colonial hierarchy, power relations
- Poetic device, alliteration, rhythm, pace, half-rhyme, onomatopoeia
- Imagery, metaphor, simile, embody
- Tone, juxtaposition

Make your own "key Words and Phrases Box" with central terms from your class work

Pre-reading Activity

1. Search the Internet or the library for a few details on the history of Berbice - British Guyana since 1831 - and its Indian population.

Here are some search suggestions "Guyanese history", "Indo-Guyanese", "Hindus in Guyana", "indentured labour in Guyana".

Analysis

1. Who is the speaker?
2. Who are the *High Street Women*?
3. Characterise the driver in the first two stanzas.
4. Explain how the poet makes you see or sense the driver's characteristics in his choice of words and use of poetic devices.
5. How does the car embody the taxi driver?
6. In what ways does line 9 in stanza two refer to the taxi driver's life?
7. What is the rhythm/ pace like in the first two stanzas? How is it created that way? Compare the pace of the first two stanzas with the third. Why the difference?
8. Look at stanza three, ll. 1-7. What words are used to characterize the taxi driver's place of origin? What impressions do you get of the human conditions in the place?
9. In what ways is Berbice different from London?
10. Look at stanza three, ll. 8-17. Sketch the glimpses you get of Berbice history. Who were the rulers? Who were defiant? Why were they defiant? How was defiance expressed?
11. Look at stanza three, ll. 10-11. What is now "discoloured" with hanging rotting heads? What does the metaphor suggest about Berbice? What does it suggest in regard to the taxi driver?
12. Do you see the driver's behaviour as a consequence of the conditions in Guyana or as a consequence of his life as an immigrant in London?
13. What do the colours amber, red and green refer to in London and Berbice respectively?
14. What do "the double-yellow lines" represent – in London and historically?
15. In what ways is Berbice history replayed in London in regard to
 - colonial power relations?
 - Hindu defiance?
 - journey?

16. How does the poet accelerate the pace in the last lines (12-17)? What does it mean that the poem ends in this way?

Summarising the Text

1. How does the poet represent London, Berbice and the taxi driver?
2. Why is the taxi driver anonymous?
3. Who is the protagonist of the poem? Who is the antagonist?
4. In what ways has the journey from Berbice to London changed the taxi driver's life?
5. What is the general tone of the poem? How is it created?
6. Sum up the themes and what the poet wants to say.
7. Sum up how form and content fit together.

Discussion

1. Discuss why some immigrants turn frustrated, and in some cases, aggressive, when they make the journey from their own culture to the Western.
2. Discuss if the sexual liberty of Western culture has a negative influence on immigrants from sexually more restrictive cultures. Has sexual immodesty in the West gone too far, or are cultures of sexual restriction underdeveloped?
3. Discuss to what extent immigrants are forced to play down their religious background in the West. What are the reasons – and may Christianity be one of them?
4. Discuss the reasons why non-white immigrants often get the less desired jobs in Europe.

Written Work

1. Rewrite the poem from the taxi driver's point of view with yourself as the passenger (you may choose another form than poetry).
2. Write a poem of an air flight seen from a passenger's or the pilot's point of view in which you try to convey speed in the rhythm and use of words. The plane may also embody the speaker's character.

3. Write about the negative characteristics that are often associated with immigrants and show how the indigenous population may have the selfsame characteristics.

Translation

En passager betragter taxichaufføren på en tur gennem London. Chaufføren er immigreret fra Barbice. Hans manerer og kommentarer er grove og utiltalende. Han harker, spytter og bander. Han er utålmodig, rastløs, og temperamentet er højspændt – det hele bliver overført på kørslen. I høj fart kastes taxien voldsomt rundt i Londons tætte trafik. Kvinder på gaden distraherer konstant chaufførens blik – sexobjekter, der fyler op under hans aggressive drifter.

Han er frit flydende i den postmoraliske storby, rykket op ved roden fra sin hinduistiske fortid. Det kulturelle landskab i Guyana er erstattet af anonymitetens plastik, stål, glas og beton. Den stædige ulydighed mod kolonimagten og den kristne dominans gentages i mytterier mod Vestens forstillede høflighed og Londons trivielle færdselsregler.

Alternativ: oversæt digtet til dansk.

CROSSING TEXTS

- Compare the repetition of history in the poem with the repetition of history in Ferdinand Dennis' "The Black and White Museum".
- Compare the use of traffic as a metaphor in this poem and in James Fellows' "Myself When I Am Real".
- Compare the strangers' strategies of making room for themselves in Fellows' "Myself When I Am Real" and the poem "Listen Mr Oxford Don" with the driver's.
- Discuss to what extent the driver is a *multicultural* individual in Caryl Phillips' sense of the word in "The Pioneers".
- How does the driver fit with Rushdie's idealisation of the migrant?
- How does the driver fit with the pictures of London immigrants in the articles "London's Comings and Goings", "Changing Shadows" and Robin Cook's speech?