

Final Assignment

Can Texts Fight Colonialism and Inequality?

Do you think text can really overcome colonialism and the concept of a superiority complex? Well, what is considered as text? What is colonialism? And is there such a thing as post-colonialism? Text is “anything we draw meaning from”¹. It could be in the form of paintings, actual literary texts, photography, songs or poetry. Colonialism is the process of taking control and asserting dominance over another country, forcing them to identify as subordinates to the European power². Post-colonialism is a very controversial debate as it is argued that there is nothing post about it since we can still see examples of modern-day colonialism like in Russia and Ukraine. The colonised have to find a way to voice their cries for help for all to hear without causing a national uproar so they employ text. To prove this point, this essay will be considering a song called “My Shot” by Lin-Manuel Miranda, another called “They Don’t Care About Us” by Michael Jackson and the poem “Di Great Insohreckshan” by Linton Kwesi Johnson and how these forms of text demonstrate resistance.

“My Shot” by Lin-Manuel Miranda adequately explores the main themes of colonialism. It considers ideas about the state of immigrants, colonialism in relation to America and England, criticism of the colonisers and a call for change. This song is also estimated to be set in 1773 which was the time period of predominant slavery. At minute 0:15, Hamilton, the immigrant, acknowledges that because of his poor social standing he has to shout or ‘holler’ to draw attention to himself, as immigrants are often overlooked, although they may be extremely intelligent. This is further emphasised by the lyrics at minute 0:23 where he says that his oratory skills cannot be doubted, even the Spanish version of the song calls them insuperable but they surely were ignored³. His use of colloquial language like ‘gotta’ emphasises his lack of polish⁴. From minutes 0:29 to 0:39 demonstrates how even the weather reflects the attitudes of the people around them and makes them feel isolated from the others. Additionally, it makes the point that immigrants have to go through so many circumstances that an indigene would not and yet they always try hard to make the best out of the situation. He also mentions his malnourished state because he is starving both for food and a purpose, a place to belong to because America does not feel like home in the Caribbean where everything is nice and sunny⁵. Hamilton also desires to fan this spark into a bigger fight for America’s freedom from submission to Britain, although not in physical chains but the colonisers keep frustrating his efforts as we can see from the line ‘damn, it’s getting dark’⁶.

¹ The Scholars Programme, Dr Letizia Alterno, ‘Can Texts Fight Colonialism and Inequality?’, p. 24

² Idem, p. 7

³ Swono et al., Genius,

<https://genius.com/Genius-traduccion-al-espanol-original-broadway-cast-of-hamilton-my-shot-traduccion-al-espanol-lyrics> [Date Accessed: 4 June 2023]

⁴ <https://genius.com/7870213>

⁵ <https://genius.com/8486618>

⁶ Ayme, Elizabeth et al., Genius,

<https://genius.com/Lin-manuel-miranda-anthony-ramos-daveed-diggs-okieriete-onaodowan-leslie-odom-jr-and-original-broadway-cast-of-hamilton-my-shot-lyrics>

At minute 0:45, Hamilton makes it clear that they should be an independent colony of Britain. However, Britain keeps taxing them on tea which in history, fuelled their anger and led to the Boston Tea Party where Sons of Liberty members disguised themselves as Mohawk Indians and destroyed 92,000 pounds of tea, throwing them into the Boston harbour on December 16, 1773 as a form of resistance against the Tea Act ⁷. This was the start of the domino effect which leads to Hamilton's comment at minute 1:00 where he directly mentions the need for a revolution for the first time without implying. This highlights the view of many Americans at the time who believed revolution was the only chance at gaining independence from the British ⁸. Lafayette's solo at minute 1:36 shows how even foreigners felt the overwhelming power of colonisers as Lafayette is French but supports the idea of an American revolution. His strong desire for the monarchy to be gone is essential to this part of the song as the monarchy was just a way for the colonisers to still be in control since the monarchy benefited greatly from the effects of colonialism, gaining slaves and global significance ⁹. At minute 1:50, Mulligan expresses his need to join the rebellion as a way to practise social mobility and finally be empowered from his current state of tailorship. This was a very common view at the time as many people yearned for a sense of belonging.

7 seconds later, Laurens draws the audience's attention to the fact that true freedom cannot be established until equal rights are granted to immigrants and in essence, the colonised. He plans on making his dream of having the first black battalion a reality, even if it results in him taking his last breath, which it did and that dream died with him. This is also a form of resistance as he does not want black people to conform to the white man's standard for them as he was strongly against the enslavement of people despite being white and his father owning slaves. This is why he promised them freedom in exchange for military service ¹⁰. He is seeking to prove coloured victims of colonialism need not feel inferior to their colonisers as an inferiority complex is just a mental construct. Burr's lines at minute 2:12 demonstrate how many colonised were ashamed to stand for their rights as they wanted to be accepted by their colonisers. Burr is held back by his respectability politics as he may appear to support their cause but does not publicly embrace it, which is similar to the actions of some in the movie 'Roots' where the black follow along in the steps of the colonisers to enslave their own brothers ¹¹. Thereby proving that not standing up for your rights is as bad as helping your fellows into bondage.

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<https://www.bostonteapartyship.com/the-tea-act#:~:text=The%20Tea%20Act%2C%20passed%20by,sales%20i n%20the%20American%20colonies> [Date Accessed: 4 June 2023]

⁸ <https://genius.com/8052601>

⁹ Clancy, Laura ,

<https://theconversation.com/five-ways-the-monarchy-has-benefited-from-colonialism-and-slavery-179911>

[Date Accessed: 7 June 2023]

¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, Siobhan ,

<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/john-laurens/#:~:text=By%20 1778%20Laurens%20had%20taken,would%20be%20granted%20their%20freedom.> [Date Accessed: 7 June

2023]

¹¹ <https://genius.com/7842791>

Minute 2:33 is a significant part of the song where they openly identify as supporters of manumission and the abolition of slavery, ignoring the fact they have strong links to slavery as Hamilton hired slaves for his in-laws, Laurens came from a slave owning family and Mulligan owned a slave named Cato ¹². Being an immigrant in a colony, trying to fight for their independence must have felt out of place for Hamilton but he fought with all his might as is seen. The lyrics from minutes 3:31 to 3:51 are the most important section of this song in support of this argument, because although this song was written in 2009, it is still very relevant as it explores the feelings of the colonised in the past and reflects on how victims of modern-day colonialism, in form of racism, also feel and it is a call for them to 'rise up' against their colonisers and break free from their hold. The musical has, however, been criticised about the race-conscious casting with claims that the songs were not created with white people in mind and although majority of the characters are coloured, they are representing white history so the aim of diversifying the actors is defeated ¹³. Moreover, it is accused of a lot of 'Founders Chic' downplaying the role of the founding fathers in slavery and mentioning slavery a few times as a background addition ¹⁴. Hamilton's lack of slaves is also attributed to his poor economic reality, not a moral achievement ¹⁵.

Considering "They Don't Care About Us" by Michael Jackson, the intense emotions of those directly affected by inequality is brought to the surface. At the very start of the song, the voices of physically and mentally tired African-Americans can be heard as they fight for justice. This echoes the cries of those who support the Black Lives Matter movement. The "garbage" mentioned is representative of the unjust treatment they receive because of the colour of their skin. At minute 1:07, he states that he could be assaulted or a victim of hate crimes but his stance will never change because he is not easily broken. This is really empowering for other blacks who feel too weak to rise up. At minute 1:15, he is showing his disdain for the idea of labelling people but rather, advocating that people be seen as individuals with distinct personalities ¹⁶. It also covers the controversy about his skin colour and his inability to identify as black or white despite being born African-American ¹⁷. This could be due to his vitiligo or plastic surgery; neither is confirmed ¹⁸. At minute 1:35, he illustrates how he is just like all the other black people suffering in the hands of the police when we are meant to be protected by them.

From minute 1:39 to 1:48, it is clear that hate crimes on these minority groups leave them seeming undignified and they can only look to the heavens for their redemption and a chance to be free like the birds in the sky. Minute 1:52 emphasises the fact that when a black person is seen, they are often accused of any evil crimes committed nearby because of

¹² <https://genius.com/7799622>

¹³ Onion, Rebecca ,

<https://slate.com/culture/2016/04/a-hamilton-critic-on-why-the-musical-isnt-so-revolutionary.html> [Date Accessed: 19 June 2023]

¹⁴ Idem

¹⁵ Idem

¹⁶ <https://genius.com/160341>

¹⁷ McKay, Rhys , <https://www.who.com.au/michael-jackson-skin-why-did-michael-jackson-turn-white> [Date Accessed: 18 June 2023]

¹⁸ Idem

the 'speculation' that takes place as a result of the stereotypes associated with that skin colour¹⁹. Minute 1:58 hints at how blacks are unlawfully thrown into jail when they themselves were blackmailed and cannot fight their oppressor because they know the system is also against them. The frustration in the lines of minute 2:11 accentuates how minority groups are not awarded the same rights as the descendants of colonisers. They are forced to become invisible as they are neglected. Minute 2:16 onwards draws great attention to the systemic racism seen today and how a whole race is classed as bad because of the mistakes of a few. This would really shock someone born in the country as Michael says because an immigrant being treated as such would be better understood but getting discriminated by people of a country you have been in your whole life is much more devastating, especially when that country is referred to as the land of the free.

Minute 2:35 further expatiates the point that the government chooses to remain blind to such social atrocities. Martin Luther King campaigned against racism so he would be devastated to see all the prospects he shared in his 'I Have A Dream' speech and all he did to battle racial barriers being pushed aside as stated at minute 3:30²⁰. Most importantly, at minute 1:11, he sympathises with Jews because they suffer alongside the African-Americans and he feels deeply hurt by this. This is why he was deeply offended when this song about identity and awareness was accused of anti-semitism. Michael made it clear the song was supposed to convey the 'pain of prejudice' and draw attention to these social and political problems but he is outraged it could be misinterpreted in such a way²¹. He elucidated that he is not racist but the voice of the accused and attacked as this essay has aimed to prove²². Moreover, the refrain carried on all through the song gives a vivid impression to the listener that these minority groups are done caring about what their colonisers think because the colonisers do not care about them anyway.

Di Great Insohreckshon sheds light on the events that happened within the three days of the Brixton Riots. According to line 1, we know it happened in April 1981. Line 2 mentions it was in the 'ghettos' of Brixton emphasising that the racial discrimination of police officers was targeted on the blacks living in poor conditions with no social connections²³. Lines 5 and 6 highlight the international attention this event drew. Line 8 reveals that the speaker was not there to see these events go down but he strongly longs to have been there. This demonstrates that when other blacks support their brothers, they are empowered just by their like state of mind. The Brixton Riots were an act of dissent and resistance against the evident racism that surrounded them, waiting to tip over. This racism had not magically appeared one day, it happened numerous times in the past but was hidden from the public eye²⁴. The black community in Brixton had held on for long enough and decided it was their time to stand up against the cruel stop and searches they experienced daily for no valid

¹⁹ Rock, Kay et al., <https://genius.com/Michael-jackson-they-dont-care-about-us-lyrics> [Date Accessed: 18 June 2023]

²⁰ <https://genius.com/2862253>

²¹ <https://apnews.com/article/293fe91b07d52c0600d7180b2791889e> [Date Accessed: 18 June 2023]

²² Idem

²³ The Scholars Programme, Dr Letizia Alterno, 'Can Texts Fight Colonialism and Inequality?', p. 19

²⁴ Novel Niche, <https://novelniche.net/2018/04/29/di-great-insohreckshan-linton-kwesi-johnson/> [Date Accessed: 19 June 2023]

reason. Lines 10-12 show us the line of action they chose. They were done fighting with words, this black war meant physical battery of oppressors, arson and defamation of public property as a suitable retaliation ²⁵. When they gathered ammunition against the stop and search, as stated in line 39, they proclaimed their royalty with eloquence and riots ²⁶.

Lines 14 and 15 openly indicate there was no social coherence in England at the time and the black community were not open to any more submission to the British. The idea presented in line 26 that postulations lead to the disfiguration of a few innocent blacks links back to a similar idea aforementioned whilst discussing "They Don't Care About Us". Line 41 reinforces the idea that they are much more powerful than their colonisers but they were tricked into ignoring their power just like the monster in "Frankenstein". However, the riots are proof of them acknowledging their power just like the monster. The idea that the colonisers were not prepared for an uprising is evident in line 46 as they had to go plan their attack because they did not have one on standby should the community choose to revolt. Finally, line 50 indicates they gave no regard to Lord Scarman, the head of the enquiry, demonstrating that they forgot about all those in positions of authority and decided that the hierarchy is irrelevant. The style of language in this poem is significant as it is written in Jamaican Creole or Patois as some know it, proving that immigrants will not wilfully conform to the white man's standard of speaking but stick to their origins and the language of their heart. Additionally, it illustrates the political failure of the government greatly and gives black people an opportunity to vent their anger through his work ²⁷.

This essay has sought out to prove that texts can indeed fight colonialism and inequality whilst using these 2 songs and this beautifully crafted poem, and I hope it has convinced you so. As Linton Kwesi Johnson said, "The struggle for justice and equality is not a struggle against individuals. It is a struggle against systems and structures that perpetuate oppression and inequality" ²⁸. The question is: Will we continue to support this sort of system?

²⁵ Idem

²⁶ Idem

²⁷ <https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/speccoll/2021/10/25/di-great-insohreckshan-by-linton-kwesi-johnson/> [Date Accessed: 19 June 2023]

²⁸ Samuels, Elizabeth , <https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/poets/linton-kwesi-johnson/> [Date Accessed: 19 June 2023]