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Black Women in Ivory Towers: Race, Gender, and Class in British Campus Fiction

Ann McClellan

Abstract

How twentieth-century British women authors represent women academics in their fiction has been recently studied, but one key element has been missing: race. The twentieth century saw the systematic dismantling of the British Empire, increasing Commonwealth immigration, and rising racial tensions at home, as evidenced by the 2011 riots in north London. Yet given the close relationship between cultural and literary history, there seems to be no evidence of these dramatic cultural changes within the campus novel genre. Using Crenshaw's highly critical term "intersectionality," this study focuses simultaneously on the lived experiences of Black women academics (through history, biography, and ethnographic study), as well as the literary interpretations of those lives. Focusing particularly on Judith Cutler's *Dying Fall* and Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, this essay argues that the absence of and/or "white-washed" representations of Black Minority Ethnic (BME) women in British campus novels signifies how BME women's experiences are either rendered invisible or are subsumed under cultural norms of whiteness and middle-class identity.

How twentieth century British women authors represent women academics in their fiction has been recently studied, but one key element has been missing: race.[1] Similar to the way social class is unmarked in such fictions (readers are forced to assume, based on the characters' professional status, that they are all middle to upper class), race itself is rarely, if ever, identified. Instead, readers are asked to accept all characters as white. Such an assumption is problematic for several reasons, particularly in light of the UK's colonial history. The twentieth century saw the systematic dismantling of the British Empire, increasing Commonwealth immigration, and rising racial tensions at home, recently evidenced by the 2011 riots in north London. Yet given the close relationship between cultural and literary history, there seems to be no evidence of these dramatic cultural changes within the campus novel genre. Such a glaring absence gives rise to several important questions: What is the historic relationship between women, higher education, and the Empire? What was happening in the higher education sectors in regard to race, equal opportunity, and gender during the late twentieth century? And

[1] "Campus novels" center on college and university life and often detail the lives of the professors both on and off campus. Generally popular since the 1950s, some of the most famous campus novels include: Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1935), Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), David Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975), and A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990).

ultimately, why are there no discussions of race, decolonization, and power in relation to contemporary fictional representations of academic women?

Following the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Heidi Mirza, Sally Tomlinson, and others, this essay follows the theoretical premise that Black women experience multiple interlocking forms of oppression: racial, gendered, classed, sexual, and colonial.[2] Using Kimberly Crenshaw's highly critical term "intersectionality," this study focuses simultaneously on the lived experiences of Black women academics (through history, biography, and ethnographic study), as well as the literary interpretations of those lives. After reviewing dozens of contemporary British women's campus novels, clearly the majority of women novelists do not see race as a critical issue for British women in academia. Focusing particularly on Judith Cutler's *Dying Fall* and Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, I argue the absent and/or "white-washed" representations of Black Minority Ethnic (BME) women in British campus novels signifies how BME women's experiences are often subsumed under cultural norms of whiteness and middle-class identity. When present, BME women academic characters are often rendered invisible and homogenized into a single larger racialized group and treated as "other."[3] While white authors may perceive the academy — and fiction depicting academic lives — as race-free and universal, studying literature written by BME women about BME women academics' experiences allows us to see how "blackness" is constructed in opposition to "whiteness" and how the UK academy and culture continue to maintain and police a white, middle-class, masculine normative ethos.

Women, Empire, and the History of Women's Higher Education in Britain

Along with Cecile Wright, Sonia Thompson, and Yvonne Channer, I argue that we must connect Black women's experiences to "current and past narratives" of the university and/in the British Empire to gain insight into the experience of non-white women academics within the UK today.[4] Over the past decade, several scholars have begun tracing the historical relationship between women, colonialism, and higher education in the United Kingdom. In fact, some of the earliest British women university graduates sought professional opportunities in countries as far away as South Africa and Canada. In a 2007 article for *TES*, Adi Bloom explained that Oxbridge women graduates had few opportunities for employment in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century, so many saw the colonies as one way of gaining teaching, research, and administrative experience.[5] Philippa Fawcett, daughter of suffragist Millicent Fawcett and

[2] Heidi Mirza rightfully points out that the common understanding of the "double" or "triple" jeopardy of Black Minority Ethnic women (race, class, and gender) is often misleading. In fact, if one adds factors such as disability, age, or religion, one quickly recognizes the complex layers that make the holistic nature of their oppression difficult to articulate or combat. Heidi Mirza, *Race, Gender, and Educational Desire: Why Black Women Succeed and Fail* (London: Routledge, 2009), 81.

[3] A note on terminology and methodology: this study focuses primarily on women of color from Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean; as such, I use the accepted terms "Black" or "Black Minority Ethnic" (BME) women to represent women present in the UK as a result of postcolonial diaspora.

[4] Cecile Wright, Sonia Thompson, and Yvonne Channer, "Out of Place: Black Women Academics in British Universities," *Women's History Review* 16, no.2 (2007): 135-62.

[5] Adi Bloom, "Women Who Forged the Empire," *TES*, 9 March 2007,

Cambridge Professor Henry Fawcett, for instance, spent the early years of her career (1902-1905) setting up schools in South Africa before being appointed lecturer in mathematics at the Normal School in Johannesburg. She later returned to London as the assistant education officer at the London County Schools. Another teacher educator, Ellen Knox, began teaching at Cheltenham Ladies College in 1892 only to leave in 1894 to become the founding head of Havergal College in Toronto. Throughout her career, she made frequent return trips to the UK to recruit staff, emphasizing the importance of *English* teachers in the home colonies. Bloom includes other colonial women educators as well: Ethel Jones left her post at the Godolphin School in Salisbury to pursue a career in South Africa in 1913, Constance Pike in the 1930s was responsible for a school district covering more than 15,000 square miles of eastern Africa, and Henrietta Roy left her Hertfordshire school to establish a girls' school in Nigeria. These women's educational credentials helped bring British models of education to the colonies and to establish standards, expectations, and new roles for women in professional fields.

British women were not the only ones taking advantage of opportunities provided by the colonial relationship. Early internationalization movements during the Victorian period resulted in the establishment of British universities in the colonies and, later, the development of international student programs at home institutions like the University of London. Studying overseas in Great Britain provided a level of prestige and expertise highly sought by organizations like the Indian Civil Service and the Colonial Service.[6] However, with the creation of the Rhodes Scholarship program in 1902,[7] many nationalistic Brits began to worry that extending educational opportunities to students in the colonies, in particular, would bring about a kind of colonial invasion. One recently unearthed anonymous "Lament of an Old Oxonian" aptly reproduced such fears:

> The married musselman arrives
> With 37 moon-eyed wives
> And fills a quad at Oriel
> While Magdalen's classic avenues
> Are occupied by shy Yahoos
> Whose habits are arboreal.
>
> The Afghan hillsmen, knives in hands
> Pursue the Proctor in his bands
> From Folly Bridge to Johns
> And Dyak head collectors stalk
> Behind the elms of Christ Church walk
> Decapitating Dons.

http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=2354479.

[6] Tamson Pietsch, "Imperial Echoes," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 8 March 2012, www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/imperial-echoes/419239.article.

[7] It was not until 1977 that an Act of Parliament changed Rhodes' will, allowing women to compete for Rhodes scholarships.

O — that such things should come to be
In my old University
But if some folk prefer 'em
And like a Barnum-Bailey show
Then Oxford's where they ought to go
My son shall go to Durham.[8]

The anonymous author is clearly playing upon racialized stereotypes and fears: Muslim polygamy, Afghani thuggery, Dyak decapitations — all are equated to spectacles one might find at a Barnum and Bailey circus show. All racialized "others" become Swiftian Yahoos in the public imagination. These white English fathers threatened to withdraw their sons from Oxbridge if its "classic avenues" were overrun by colonial imports. Such literary portrayals quickly reveal how cultural stereotypes and fears are constructed and disseminated across a nation.

While the poem above clearly portrays a masculine colonial threat, colonial women did not receive the same kind of scrutiny. Upper class Indian women, in particular, frequently sought out UK universities in order to gain specialized credentials in professional fields. For instance, Dr. Pandita Ramabai attended Cheltenham Ladies College as early as 1884 under the tutelage of legendary education reformer Dorothea Beale, and Annie Jagannadhan studied to become a physician at the Edinburgh School of Medicine for women in 1888 and 1892.[9] The three daughters of the Maharajah Duleep Singh (Sophia, Bamba, and Catherine) entered Somerville College in 1890.[10] Perhaps the most well-known Indian woman student, Cornelia Sorabji, came to Somerville College in 1889, on a scholarship provided by Lady Mary Hobhouse and her husband, originally to study medicine, although her final degree in 1892 marked her as the first woman — British or otherwise — to study law at a British university.[11] Sorabji, described by her patroness as "a young woman of 'pure Indian birth,'" came from a Christian family in Bombay, made frequent trips back to England during her adulthood and saw herself as an "ardent . . . little Tory."[12] Sorabji's attendance at Oxford was the direct result of her privileged class position — her father was a minister, her application was financially supported by a British aristocrat — and her religion. As a Christian rather than a Hindu or Muslim, Sorabji did not suffer from the same prejudices or cultural fears many other people of color experienced upon emigration to the UK. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to include a thorough discussion of the nuanced and detailed history of colonial immigration to the United Kingdom, the legacy of colonialism significantly influenced Black students' participation and opportunity in the British

[8] Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 130.

[9] Ibid., 84. Ketu H. Katrak, *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 130.

[10] Burton, *At the Heart of Empire*, 132.

[11] Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 93.

[12] Burton, *At the Heart of Empire*, 110, 113.

higher education system throughout the century, and we are only beginning to study its effects and consequences.[13]

Black Minority Ethnic Women Today: Academic Truths

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and several recent articles in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Guardian* all report on the striking dearth of BME women academics in UK universities, particularly at the professorial level. Even though women of color have participated in the British higher education system since the 19th century, as noted above, very little research on BME women students or academics was conducted until the late twentieth century. There were at least two studies about black women students in higher education in the 1980s — most likely a result of the 1968 Race Relations Act and its subsequent amendment in 1976.[14] Unfortunately, many of these studies do not separate students by gender, so it is difficult to determine what percentage of these numbers represents women students. However, at least two studies revealed that while BME people represented approximately 6% of the working population in Britain in 2004, they constituted 15% of all students; in fact, young BME students were three times more likely to attend university than their white counterparts.[15]

In spite of the increasing literature and statistics on BME students, there were few direct figures relating to black women academics until the 2000s.[16] Higher education agencies like the Polytechnics Central Admissions System (PCAS), the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), and the Universities Central Clearing and Admissions (UCCA) did not begin to track and assess ethnic minority populations, at either the student or professional levels, until the early 1990s. Since then, several scholars, such as Blair and Maylor (1993), Crozier and Menter (1993), David, Edwards, Hughes, and Ribbens (1993), Modood (1993), and Siraj-Blatchford (1990) have begun researching this demographic.[17] In some of the recent data focused on BME faculty, a few striking details stand out:

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[13] For more detailed information on the history of colonial migration and British immigration policy in the twentieth century, see Angela Dawson, *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007); Joanna Herbert, *Negotiating Boundaries of the City: Migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in Britain* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Press, 2012); and R. G. Spencer, *British Immigration Policy Since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[14] Sally Tomlinson, "Black Women in Higher Education: Case Studies of University Women in Britain," In *Race, Class and Education*, eds. Len Barton and Stephen Walker (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 66-80.

[15] Heidi Mirza, "Race, Gender, and Educational Desire," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 9, no. 2 (2006): 16. Yasmin Hussain and Paul Bagguley, *Moving On Up: South Asian Women and Higher Education* (Stoke on Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 2007), 27.

[16] Danusia Malina and Sian Maslin-Prothero, Introduction to *Surviving the Academy: Feminist Perspectives* (London: Falmer Press, 1998), vii. Henry Millsom, "Ivory Towers and Ebony Women: The Experiences of Black Women in Higher Education." In *Changing the Subject: Women in Higher Education*, eds. Sue Davies, Cathy Lubelska, and Jocey Quinn (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 48-9.

[17] Maud Blair and Uvanney Maylor, "Issues and Concerns for Black Women Teachers in Training," in "*Race," Gender and the Education of Teacher*s, ed. Iram Siraj-Blatchford (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996), 55-73; G. Crozier and I. Mentor, "The Heart of the Matter? Student Teachers' Experiences in School," in *"Race," Gender and the Education of Teachers*, ed. Iram Siraj-Blatchford; Miriam E. David, Rosalind Edwards, Mary Hughes, and Jane Ribbens, *Mothers and Education: Inside Out? Exploring Family Education Policy and Experience* (NY: Macmillan P, 1993); Tariq Modood, "The Number of Ethnic Minority Students in British Higher Education: Some Grounds for Optimism,"

- Although women now account for 44% of all UK academics, BME women account for just 1.6%.[18]
- British-born BME women (55.5%) were even more likely than British white women to be on fixed term contracts (42.6%).[19]
- According to the 2012 HESA, there were 14, 385 professors in the UK, of which only 50 were black (0.4 %); of that number just 10 were women.[20]

Studies found that BME academics were less likely to be promoted than their white peers.[21] Perhaps the most disheartening statistic revealed that at the current rates of participation and promotion, it would take over 56 years for the proportion of women professors to match the number of women staff in lower level positions.[22]

Some critics claim that "no clear black-white divide" exists in these statistics, but rather only differences in subjects, region, and institutions.[23] For instance, research conditions often make it difficult to draw conclusions for several reasons: the scarcity of evidence; individual researchers, institutions, and governing bodies report their findings differently; 6.5% of respondents choose not to specify their racial/ethnic identity;[24] and some studies only focus on a specialized demographic (i.e., Sandra Acker's research on Black women teacher education students).Others argue that under- or over-representation of BME academics in certain institutions is more the result of regional demographics than intentional racial discrimination. Some critics point out, for example, that BME groups are often over-represented in the new universities within urban regions,[25] but then again, African Caribbean and Bangladeshi academics were significantly underrepresented in the UCCA sector.[26] Other scholars, like Matthew Reisz, argue that class, not race or gender, is the true determining factor in academic

Oxford Review of Education 19, no. 2 (1993): 167-82; Iram Siraj-Blatchford, "Positive Discrimination: The Underachievement of Initial Teacher Education," *Multicultural Teaching* 8, no. 2 (1990): 14-19.

[18] Deborah Gabriel, "Race Equality in Academia: Time to Establish Black Studies in the UK?" *The Guardian*., 25 July 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/jul/25/race-equality-academia-curriculum.

[19] Cecily Jones, "Black Women in Ivory Towers: Racism and Sexism," in *Identity and Difference in higher Education: 'Outsiders Within*,' eds. Pauline Anderson and Jenny Williams (Aldershot: Ashgate P, 2001), 160.

[20] Osei Boateng, "How Britain Treats its Black Academics," *New African Magazine*, 8 January 2013, http://www.newafricanmagazine.com/features/diaspora/how-britain-treats-its-black-academics. There are some discrepancies in reported statistics. Both Gabriel and Richards report 85 Black professors in the UK, of which 17 are female; however, even with these increased numbers, the percentage (0.4%) remained the same.

[21] Boateng, "How Britain Treats," and Rachel Williams, "The University Professor is Always White," *The Guardian*, 28 January 2013,. http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/jan/28/women-bme-professors-academia.

[22] Graeme Paton, "'Set Quotas to get More Women Academics,'" *The Telegraph*, 29 January 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/9834552/Set-quotas-to-get-more-women-academics.html.

[23] Sandra Acker, *Gendered Education: Sociological Reflections on Women, Teaching, and Feminism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994), 142.

[24] Claire Sanders, "Black Academics Strive to Smash 'Ivory Ceiling,'" *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 16 November 2005, www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=199781.

[25] Acker, *Gendered Education*, 142.

[26] Afro-Caribbean is a term commonly used to describe Caribbean citizens of African descent, while African Caribbean is the term more commonly used for black UK citizens of Caribbean descent. The category is determined by citizenship and nationality. Millsom, "Ivory Towers and Ebony Women," 47.

success. According to Reisz, "defining people by race or gender hides how they are differentiated by class. This has the effect of dividing people by race and gender who may be connected to class."[27] Clearly, important class markers are still within higher education participation and in the professoriate. However, rather than privileging class over race or gender, an intersectional approach requires us to look at how all of these factors contribute to identity formation, opportunity, and agency.

Such findings have created a battleground over regarding race, class, and gender discrimination in subsequent years. For instance, a *THES* editorial from 2000 detailed how their statistical findings for female and ethnic minority professors caused "consternation even before publication" and even resulted in threats of litigation from institutions that showed poorly in the results.[28] This continuing institutional and possibly national refusal to acknowledge differential experiences based on race/ethnicity, gender, class, and/or sexual orientation, reveals the "white as normative" culture still underpinning British academia and leaves BME women academics with few safe places in which to openly confront instances of racial and/or gender discrimination.

Because so few places exist where BME men and women can safely talk about their experiences of racism on university campuses, in 2001 the Black Association of University Teachers' (AUT) Equality Challenge Unit — "a body that promotes equal opportunities in higher education" — proposed a series of "Witness Days" along the lines of the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" in post-Apartheid South Africa. On designated days, BME university staff could "speak about their experiences and suggest strategies for tackling discrimination and blocks to promotion."[29] As a follow up, the Equality Challenge Unit published a literature review in 2009, but unfortunately there was no mention of any such "Witness Days" occurring. Such events may be viewed with suspicion by many BME women staff and faculty at UK universities where participation could threaten their terms of employment.

Although the AUT's Witness Days may have failed, there have been several recent developments which call attention to the significant underrepresentation of BME men and women in academia and programs for support. For instance, PhD student Janine Bradbury has developed a program at the University of Sheffield to mentor BME schoolchildren and their parents in the hopes that some will consider academic careers in the future. PhD student Nathan Richards' video project, "Absent from the Academy," focuses on the perspectives of Black university students and academics from within the academy itself; ironically, the only woman included in Richards' 30 minute video, Dr. Denise Noble, no longer teaches in the UK, having moved to Ohio State University in the USA.[30] The Runnymede Trust established the

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[27] Matthew Reisz, "It's Right Posh in T'common Room, Innit?" *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 27 November 2008, http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/its-right-posh-in-tcommon-room-innit/404432.article.

[28] "Gross Discrimination Deserves the Spotlight," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 7 April 2000, www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=151075.

[29] Helen Hague, "Initiative to Tackle Racism," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 16 November 2001, http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=165832.

[30] Nathan Richards, "Absent from the Academy: The Lack of Black Academics in the UK Limits the Wider Impact of Universities," The London School of Economics and Political Science (blog), 6 November 2013, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/11/06/absent-from-the-academy/.

Emerging Scholars Forum in 2012, composed of 30 of the UKs top scholars working on race.[31] There have been calls for an equivalent to the Athena Swan (Scientific Women's Academic Network) program for BME academics, and another group of Oxbridge academics began a petition-signing campaign in November 2013 to get the Russell Group universities to stop racially discriminating against Black academics.[32] Hopefully, such recent initiatives will prove successful in recruiting, mentoring, and promoting more BME women academics in the UK.

Unlike white women academics who can identify other academics like themselves both above and below in the hierarchy, BME women experience the academy through what Sonia Thompson has called "cultural and ethnic isolation."[33] BME women are so rare in academic settings that they are often literally viewed as outsiders. One Black woman tutor shared her belittling experience working at the library one day: "I went early one morning to a University library at 9:00 am not realising it didn't open until 9:30am . . . The librarian who I know asked me how I had got in. I said the door was open . . . I went back with her to ask the security man why the door was open . . . When he saw me, he said, 'but she's the cleaner'."[34] Clearly, the security guard equated the tutor's race with an assumed class position; since she is Black, she must be working class, a service worker. In his mind her race (and gender) automatically precluded her from being a member of the academic staff. Protesting such treatment may feel detrimental to BME women's tenuous positions, not only because they may be the only BME professor on campus — male or female — but also since most Black and minority ethnic academics (up to 92%) are on the lower end of the pay scale.[35]

Not only are BME women academics viewed as outsiders, but they also lack the kinds of role models, mentors, and professional and personal networks to which many white women are privy. After working several years as a full-time academic, one BME woman in Thompson's study observed:

> With the exception of the Black studies and minority programs I never come into contact with another Black professor or administrator in my day-to-day activities . . . There is no one to share similar experiences and gain support, no one with whom to identify, no one on whom a Black woman can model herself . . . The feeling is much like the exhaustion a foreigner speaking an alien tongue feels at the end of the day.[36]

White women lecturers have varied career opportunities open to them, have more white women role models on whom to base their own career progressions, and they can avoid

[31] Runnymede: Intelligence of a Multi-Ethnic Britain, "Emerging Scholars Forum," http://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects-and-publications/academic-forum/emerging-forum.html.

[32] Boateng, "How Britain Treats."

[33] Sonia Thompson, "Who Goes There, Friend or Foe? Black Women, White Women and Friendships in Academia," in *Surviving the Academy: Feminist Perspectives* , eds. Danusia Malina and Sian Maslin-Prothero (London: Falmer Press, 1998), 122-35.

[34] Ibid., 128.

[35] Mirza, *Race, Gender, and Educational Desire*, 115.

[36] Thompson, "Who Goes There," 127.

competing with peers for research opportunities and funding because the number of white women in the academy allows them to make friends with women from other disciplines within the institution and abroad.[37] There are no such networks for BME women.

In fact, the literal space of the university itself can be unwelcoming and even foreign to BME women academics. "Within this context," Wright et al. explain, "Black women are located within a space from which Black people and Black intellectual thought have been historically excluded" (127). According to Franz Fanon, "Black bodies that have gone through 'white civilizing spaces,' such as education, can . . . don a white mask on their Black skins. This mask . . . is acquired slowly through white civilizing spaces and processes. Thus, Black people can be equal if they attempt to act as if, or be the same as, white people."[38] This "white as normative" model is particularly problematic within the university since the academy is supposedly a liberal space where diversity, identity politics, and social justice are theorized. Indeed, as Wright et al. argue, universities "are perceived as places of reason and neutrality . . . Liberalism assumes that 'race' does not matter. This is because it is constructed by white people who have not needed to conceive of themselves in racialistic spaces from which they tautologically reify themselves and where whiteness is defined as the 'norm'."[39]

In their article, "Out of Place: Black Women Academics in British Universities," Cecile Wright, Sonia Thompson, and Yvonne Channer explain how many Black British women feel about working in an academy where white, middle-class identity is considered the standard. White women academics gained access to British higher education decades before Blacks and therefore were able to determine what "counts" in terms of gender issues.[40] According to Thompson, white women "compartmentalize 'race' from gender and assume that all women are white," a fact which seems reinforced by the ways in which many of the previously mentioned surveys are organized.[41] BME women's experiences are thus "interpreted through the lens of mainstream and Eurocentric research and practices."[42] The danger of such othering is that white women and men begin to see Black women academics as tropes rather than as individuals.[43] Lola Young, the first Black woman professor at Middlesex University, illuminates the responsibility many young BME women and men must face to "carry the burden of representing their people" in a way that is never expected of white individuals. If a person is white, Young argues, things happen to them as an individual; "but when something happens to

[37] Ibid., 131.

[38] Wright et al., *Out of Place*, 149.

[39] Ibid., 149.

[40] Thompson, "Who Goes There," 125.

[41] Ibid., 126.

[42] Sheila T. Gregory, "The Cultural Constructs of Race, Gender and Class: A Study of How Afro-Caribbean Women Academics Negotiate their Careers," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 19, no.3 (2006): 347-66.

[43] African American novelist Toni Morrison has written eloquently on the ways in which white writers historically have objectified Black people and characters as literary tropes by which to define whiteness. "American Africanism," Morrison explains, is the way in which the "nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served" (7). For Morrison, Africanisms often reveal more about the trope creators (i.e., the white authors) than the tropes themselves. Whiteness does not exist in isolation, Morrison argues; rather, it is always already defined in opposition to a created blackness.

a black woman or man, it happens to them as representative of their 'race'."[44] It is particularly important when looking at fictional representations of BME women academics that we avoid seeing a single fictional portrayal as representative of all BME women's experiences. Rather, what fictional portrayals often do provide are ideological patterns by which we can question cultural assumptions about identity, categories, and behaviors.

BME Women and/in Contemporary Campus Fiction

Like their real-life counterparts, many fictional representations of BME women academics suffer from cultural and ethnic isolation, a lack of role models, and middle-class white-as-normative ideals. While there have been dozens of female-authored British campus novels published in the past thirty years, very few make specific reference to any students or professors of color, nor do they acknowledge Britain's colonial history. Among these few, two stand out: *Dying Fall* by British author Judith Cutler and *In the Eyes of the Sun* by Egyptian author Ahdaf Soueif. While Cutler's mystery focuses primarily on a female character, Soueif's novel looks at the British higher education system from the position of a post-colonial "outsider," simultaneously revealing the cultural prejudices and class privileges embedded in the system.

One of the few contemporary campus novels that makes a brief mention of ethnically diverse students and staff is Judith Cutler's 1995 mystery *Dying Fall*. In the novel, Dr. Sophie Rivers is a happy and successful lecturer at William Murdock College until tragedy strikes: one of her students, Wajid, and her best friend, George, are murdered, and Sophie takes on the familiar role of literary detective and solves the case. In a novel full of marked racial depictions — almost all of the student characters have clearly Middle Eastern or South Asian names (Wajid, Aftab, Manjit, Khalid, Fatima), and other Black characters like Winston, Philomena, Dean, and orchestra leader Aberlene have their non-white status explicitly articulated — Sophie is virtually unmarked, racially, for the majority of the novel. Only one subtle reference is to her appearance near the start of the book: "Whoever had bequeathed me my genes had ensured that I would be small and wiry, with mousy hair and an undistinguished face."[45] The reader is left to infer, from this lack of description in comparison with other characters' abundant racial modifiers — even Sophie's ex-fiancé, Kenjii, is explicitly racialized as Japanese — that Sophie is supposed to be seen as the reader's "norm." She represents the white, middle-class audience who would be interested in reading a campus mystery, an audience who would share her "us-them" mentality. Establishing the narrator and protagonist of the novel as white and middle class, Cutler establishes that academia is a white person's environment. When people of color enter into that "ivory tower," violence occurs.

A few instances of racism are in the novel, the first reminiscent perhaps of Dorothy L. Sayers' famous "poison pen" mystery in *Gaudy Night* (1935). After first discovering Wajid's body in an elevator on campus, Sophie neglects to inform the police of an "ugly" racial encounter on campus earlier the very same afternoon where "a gang of white lads . . . had hurled plates from the canteen window at a group of Asian girls." In her defense, Sophie tells

[44] Lola Young, "The Colour of Ivory Towers," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 5 June 1998, http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=107645.

[45] Judith Cutler, *Dying Fall* (London: Judy Piatkus Publishers, 1995), 82.

the police, "You know what college is like — ten thousand students use it, all from different backgrounds. Class, culture, race."[46] In another scene, Sophie comes across a bit of offensive graffiti depicting "nasty little caricatures suggesting that the only criminals were Asian" with a hand-scrawled note of "ONE DOWN, HOW MANY TO GO?" written on top.[47] On the one hand, Sophie seems to recognize that multiple factors often influence interpersonal relationships. Race is not the only factor here, she seems to argue; class and culture cause conflict as well. At the same time, however, by denying the racial motivations of the attack — she notes to herself that it is a group of "white" boys antagonizing a group of "Asian" girls, the racist caricatures are "little" — she undercuts the importance that race and gender play in a collegiate environment, especially for people who are members of those communities.

Dying Fall only references one BME woman academic, Sophie's friend and colleague Shahida. Although she is never specifically identified racially, her name and Sophie's mention of Shahida's mother's samosas are supposedly clear indications of her Southeast Asian origins to a "white" audience. Like her students of color, Shahida, is familiar with racist attacks within the university environment. Later in the novel, Shahida tells Sophie of a frightening encounter with a hostile man in the coffee lounge on campus: "There was this guy in the coffee lounge. Very well dressed, very suave. About fifty, I suppose. With some other group — not one of us, thank goodness. He just turned to me and looked at me and said, 'Breed like fucking rabbits, that's the trouble with your sort.' And he just walked away."[48] Shahida makes some interesting distinctions here between the man, "very well dressed, very suave," not being "one of us," clearly identifying that she sees herself and Sophie within the same community or identity structure (i.e., academics). At the same time, however, what this scene highlights for the reader, and perhaps for Sophie herself, is that Shahida is *not* "one of us"; as a BME woman, she is viewed as an outsider. Other than these few references, Cutler's novel never explicitly deals with ethnicity, racism, or othering in the novel.

In other sections of the novel, Cutler seems to go out of her way to highlight how successful Sophie's Asian students are, perhaps to "prove" to her audience this is possible. Aftab is described as "the star of [Sophie's] twilight GCSE English class and one of the best students of the year"; Sophie describes him as "decent, honest, hard-working. Very bright. Could be the first Asian Lord Chancellor."[49] One of her former students, Khalid Mushtaq, "earned a first and is getting his PhD in Computing at the London School of Economics, while his girlfriend, Fatima, teaches Law at Birmingham University."[50] Similarly, African Caribbean student Winston, now working as William Murdoch College's porter, is heading to St. Mary's College, London, to study Medicine the following year.[51] One could interpret such emphases on these students' success in a few different ways. On the one hand, Cutler does an excellent job of highlighting the academic and professional successes of BME students and academics in a genre where no other writers are even acknowledging their existence. On the other hand, readers

[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., 24.
[48] Ibid., 20, 106.
[49] Ibid., 17, 30.
[50] Ibid., 160, 170.
[51] Ibid., 19.

might be skeptical of such portrayals and argue that Cutler is trying to overemphasize such successes as exceptions to the rule. By trying to defeat racist assumptions about BME student and academic success, she risks reinforcing white readers' assumptions that such individuals do not truly belong in the world of academia.

Winston and his mother Philomena are perhaps two of the most intriguing characters in Cutler's novel, since both of them seem to recognize and even manipulate white characters' racist assumptions about BME people to their own advantage. When he is first interrogated by the police, Winston exaggerates his "Afro-Caribbean lilt."[52] Later, his mother Philomena, the college cleaner, easily slips between her Afro-Caribbean patois and the received pronunciation of the middle classes.[53] Both Winston and Philomena use their Afro-Caribbean patois in order to avoid unwanted attention from groups like the police who are often accused of racist profiling. By confirming the white policemen's — and audience's — expectations of being both ignorant and working class, Winston and Philomena are allowed to go on their way and to continue their work without risk of disruption or detention.

What is perhaps most surprising for the reader is that even though Philomena is first introduced as the college cleaner, she was formerly a "theatre nurse in a specialized neurological unit which had been absorbed into a bigger hospital" and thus is actually "as highly qualified as most of the staff" at the college.[54] Like the previously discussed Black professor who was mistaken for the college cleaner,[55] by first establishing Philomena as a service worker, Cutler seems to be reinforcing cultural and class expectations about Black people within the academy. Not until later in the novel, once her audience has fallen for this stereotypical depiction, does Cutler pull the rug out from under her audience's feet, so to speak, and reveal the racist, gendered, and classist assumptions underlying the audience's expectation that Philomena's current job as a cleaner precludes her from any other educational qualifications or expertise.

While Cutler's *Dying Fall* elevates working class assumptions about BME students and academics in order to both reinforce and challenge the audience's pre-conceived conceptions about gender, race, and class in academia, Ahdaf Soueif's novel *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) seems to argue that the legacy of British colonization — not gender, race, or class — is what is keeping BME women from UK college campuses.[56] Set in 1970s Cairo and Lancaster, England, the novel follows Asya Saif (nee al-Ulama), daughter of two prominent Egyptian academics, through her teenage years and early marriage, her PhD education in Stylistics in northern England, the demise of her marriage, and her subsequent career as an English professor at the University of Cairo at the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

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[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 98, 130.

[54] Ibid., 98.

[55] Thompson, "Who Goes There," 128.

[56] Nigerian Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1983) and Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 1988) both include Black women academics who have been educated in England, much like Soueif's Asya Saif; however, neither includes any details of the characters' experiences during that period.

Asya experiences the same kinds of isolation that other BME women academics have described in recent research studies. As Lola Young explained in her 1998 article for the *THES*, "there is no space for black academics in Britain to get together and exchange information, commiserate over indignities, or celebrate achievements. Crucially, there is still a sense that being a black academic or intellectual is unnatural, a betrayal."[57] Although Asya never goes so far in the novel to say her education is a "betrayal," she certainly feels isolated from her peers when in England. Six days after arriving on campus in northern England to begin her PhD, she notes: "I haven't talked to anybody except my supervisor for fifteen minutes on Wednesday." Later, she makes an interesting distinction between enjoying the "solitude" of working on her research in her cottage in the English countryside with the "loneliness" she felt on campus, "where she was surrounded by people she did not know and would never know."[58] Not only does Asya admit that she does not know anyone on campus, but she also declares she will never "know" these cultural others, and they will never "know" her. As Ketu H. Katrak explains in *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World*, higher education often causes female protagonists to feel "culturally alienated," especially when educated abroad in England; they become "insiders/outsiders in their own families, communities and cultures."[59] Katrak labels higher education a "double-edged sword," a theme picked up by several Black women writers like Soueif, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Buchi Emecheta, and others.[60]

Interestingly, the novel contrasts the lack of British BME women graduate students and professors with the seeming plethora of Egyptian women academics in Cairo. Unlike *Dying Fall*, where the reader is presented with only one BME woman academic, Soueif's novel has a proliferation of women English professors, physicists, and medical doctors. In fact, virtually everyone in protagonist Asya Saif's family has a PhD Asya questions throughout the novel whether she had ever really "chosen" the path toward a PhD or if it was just something expected of her, and this ambivalence plagues her research and her desire to find meaning in her work and life. Midway through the novel she observes: "Her parents, all their friends, [her sister] Nadia — it was just a fact: if you were clever enough and lucky enough you ended up in the university — preferably Cairo University because the others didn't really count. The only questions were what you would teach. Medicine? Architecture? Political science? Psychology?"[61] Recent statistics regarding Egyptian women's participation in higher education reveal that over 50% of university students are female, and about one-third of all academic staff at public universities are women. Women have recently been promoted as heads of the engineering, science, media, and political science programs, and at least one recent Secretary-General for the Higher Council for Universities was a woman.[62] Compared with other campus novels where British BME women academics are literally or metaphorically invisible, Egyptian

[57] Young, "The Colour of Ivory Towers."

[58] Ahdaf Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 336, 435.

[59] Katrak, *Politics of the Female Body*, 155.

[60] Ibid., 98.

[61] Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun*, 450.

[62] Ashraf Khaled, "Egypt: Women Eye Top University Post." *University World News* 22, 8 February 2009, http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20090205202945745.

women in this novel seem incredibly emancipated. They can choose to pursue a degree and career in whatever field they like. Clearly, the underlying difference for such characters is class, and it is striking that we only see this kind of opportunity and class privilege in a text written by a post-colonial writer. The question in Soueif's novel does not seem to be about women's access to higher education but more the *meaningfulness* of such pursuit.

Evidence of Britain's colonial past is everywhere in the novel. Asya Saif moves from Cairo, Egypt, to northern England to complete her PhD in Stylistics in the late 1970s, only to find remnants of British Imperialism everywhere, most particularly in the heart of the nation, London:

> The statues, the spacious greens where with her parents she used to listen to military bands on sunny afternoons, the great black wrought-iron railings, the intricate tower with the four-faced clock: the accoutrements of Empire. Built of course on Egyptian cotton and debt, on the wealth of India, on the sugar of the West Indies, on centuries of adventure and exploitation ending in the division of the Arab world and the creation of the state of Israel, etc.[63]

Asya immediately follows this observation that Britain's wealth is based on colonial expectation with a statement of her own appreciation and gratitude for the Empire; even though this world is built upon the oppression and suffering of her own and similar nations, Asya questions why "she does not find it in her heart to feel resentment or bitterness or anything but admiration for and pleasure in the beauty, the graciousness, the harmony of the scene." Rather, she fears it is "a sinister, insidious colonialism implanted in her very soul: a form of colonialism that no rebellion can mitigate and no treaty bring to an end."[64] Not only has Britain colonized and consumed the natural resources and wealth of its former colonies, as the earlier passage explains, but it has also succeeded in colonizing its subjects' *souls*.

Some critics like Sonia Thompson ultimately see white women's presence within the British academy as another form of colonization, a staking out of territory and a standardization of concepts, identities, and issues.[65] Asya, like her mother before her, has been conditioned to love the Mother Country, to admire its literature and art as representative of beauty and taste, and, in a sense, to continue see herself always in relation to Egypt's colonial past with Britain. Like her mother, she specializes in English Literature, not Arabic Literature — the notion "hadn't even crossed her mind . . . What if her mother had thrust Bein el-Qasrein into her hands that night instead of Lane? She couldn't have; Asya at six couldn't read Arabic; they were in England and English was what she read." Because she spent her early childhood in England while her mother completed her PhD, Asya's first language was English, not Arabic; one could argue that her cultural identity is more English than Egyptian or, conversely, that her culture was colonized at a very young age. Later on, as an adult, she tells personified Britain, "You

[63] Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun*, 511-2.
[64] Ibid.,449, 512.
[65] Thompson, "Who Goes There," 125.

cannot disclaim responsibility for my existence, nor for my being here,"[66] which provides an interesting perspective on anti-immigration policies and nationalist arguments against BME employment; after all, Asya's presence in Lancaster is a direct result of Britain's colonial history with Egypt: her degree is actually funded by a British Council grant.[67]

We can see an example of this racial othering in *In the Eye of the Sun* when Asya is asked by her Linguistics professor to come "demonstrate" non-English (i.e., Arabic) sounds for his class. As has been established, English is Asya's first language, so for the professor to assume that she is not a native English speaker because of her Egyptian ethnicity immediately reveals the kinds of associations frequently made between skin color and language, culture, and identity. Once Asya begins articulating the specific Arabic sounds asked of her, she quickly begins to struggle with her internal versus performative selves: "The sounds she makes start to sound odd to her. Odd sounds without meaning. Nobody is writing or doing anything. Just listening. . . She tells herself that a lot of the MAs have funny sounds in their own languages. There's a lady from Malaysia and three men from Pakistan." The practice of performing her ethnic identity — her otherness — in front of her peers causes Asya to begin to separate from her sense of self. She no longer recognizes her own language; it sounds "odd to her. Odd sounds without meaning." She reminds herself that she is not the only "other" in the room; many of the surrounding graduate students come from former colonies or other nations. However, in this scene, Asya becomes the "subject" — both of intellectual analysis and of (post)colonial interrogation. Ultimately, Asya's voice begins to close off and fail her: "Asya tries to say Qur'an but the word won't come. The class is waiting. She tries 'qaf,' but her voice just won't come."[68] Ironically, Asya cannot articulate "qaf," the phonetic sound signifying the letter "q" in Arabic — the starting letter of the Qur'an, the foundational text of Islam. By being asked to display and, in a sense, justify herself to her British and postcolonial peers, Asya loses her voice and cannot articulate any sense of self at all.

A slight shift in this theme is near the end of the novel, perhaps even more chilling in light of the rising Islamic fundamentalism that was beginning to spread more rapidly at this time. The entire novel is written non-linearly and covers Egypt during the war-torn years of 1967-1979. By the end of the book, the universities have democratized and expanded rapidly, bringing in a new influx of fundamentalist students, particularly women. After reading a student's paper stating she wants to study English literature in order to "learn the language of [her] enemy," Asya, now a lecturer at Cairo University, calls the student out in class to explain her comment. The young woman, who "sat shrouded in the front row," is unable to answer, as another unveiled woman student explains, "because the voice of a woman is 'awra' [a part of the body which should never be shown in public]."[69] When confronted with the seeming contradiction of the veiled woman student in her university class and the simultaneous Islamic ban on her speaking in that space, Asya admits she has a "sneaking admiration" for these fundamentalist women students. As she tells her sister, these young women "have sorted out some kind of answer to what's happening all around us — all the manifestations of the West

[66] Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun*, 458, 512.
[67] Ibid., 694.
[68] Ibid., 354.
[69] Ibid. 754.

that they see here are no good for them, for the way of life they want to hold on to, the values they feel comfortable with, even to their standard of living. And their answer is genuine, it's not imported or borrowed from anywhere."[70] Although Deena does go on to challenge the "genuineness" of this fundamentalism — she claims it is an urban phenomenon — Asya is willing to let these women students compare her position as a university professor to a "porno-spread."[71] The ending of the novel implies, then, that the acceptance and permissiveness of Egyptian women in the academy is waning in the face of rising fundamentalist agendas.

Conclusion

Many BME women academics — both in and out of fiction — have pointed out that racism seems to be particularly problematic in British universities. As one Afro-Caribbean woman who had spent extensive time in England explained: "My awareness of color and race and the fact that it can determine life choices began with my experience in England"; as a result, she and her family decided to emigrate to Jamaica where she did not encounter the same difficulties.[72] Another woman explained how she problematized her blackness only after she had taken classes in the U.S.: "Having seen so many black female professors in North Carolina," Janine Bradbury writes, "I felt I too could pursue a career in teaching anywhere I wanted. I returned to the UK with the US equivalent of a first in my pocket and a renewed sense of direction, only to feel deflated when I realized how white and male Russell Group university departments can be."[73] As both these experiences attest, white, Eurocentric cultures like those found in the U.K. ultimately force BME women to other themselves.

In consequence, BME women like Lola Young never feel completely at ease in higher education; left with a feeling of ambivalence, many choose to leave the country and/or academia altogether. Mark Christian reports that many Black British academics choose to work in the US, perhaps because of the lack of Black Studies programs in the UK and because of the lack of commitment to equal opportunity policies.[74] Some Asian academics researching Islam or Middle Eastern politics and/or culture in the UK have noticed an increased sense of vulnerability since the September 11 attacks.[75] Other scholars, like Pat Ellis and Sheila T. Gregory, detail the number of opportunities available for BME women in the Caribbean. While most management and administrative positions in the Caribbean remain in the hands of men, this is changing, with more and more women serving as ministers of education in Barbados,

[70] Ibid, 755.

[71] Ibid., 754.

[72] Gregory, "The Cultural Constructs of Race," 358-9.

[73] Janine Bradbury, "Black, Female and Postgraduate: Why I Cannot be the Only One," *The Guardian*, 3 May 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/may/03/black-postgraduate-university-diversity-recruitment.

[74] In October 2004 *The Times* reported that up to 50% of all Black male social scientists may have left the UK to work in other countries like the US (Boateng).

[75] Helen Hague, "It's a Painful Time to be in the Minority," *Times Higher Education Supplement*. 16 November 2001, http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=165764.

Grenada, Guyana, and St. Lucia over the years.[76] Sheila T. Gregory further argues that Black women in Caribbean universities, for example, experience "greater autonomy in their departments and college; have . . . more opportunities for international travel, [have] more centralized academic departments; higher rates of job satisfaction, [and are] more likely to be tenured" than in the UK.[77] So, while some BME women are able to find satisfaction in their careers, it usually requires a transatlantic move and an exit from UK higher education altogether.

For some women, their experiences have been so discouraging that they have chosen to leave the university system altogether. Professor Gargi Bhattacharya, a Black AUT member, was told by a friend that she was "wasting herself" in higher education and asked why she puts up with it all when she could "get more money, respect and autonomy outside" the academy.[78] Bhattacharya, the 2008 AUT president, agreed that there were probably better opportunities for her skills and education elsewhere, yet she chose to remain within the academy to theorize about race and gender. Other BME women describe their experiences in higher education as "daily humiliations" from students and "resource gate-keepers," especially white women academics.[79] Working in such a hostile environment is debilitating for these women, so it is no surprise that so many leave higher education in order to salvage their sense of self, and it is likewise unsurprising that there are so few novels dealing with race, gender, and academia in a British context.

Both of the novels discussed here portray strong Black women academic characters dealing with complex professional and gender conflicts. Although their prospects often look bleak, the very existence of such characters provides a cultural mirror by which readers can acknowledge, examine, and critique BME women's presence and participation in both UK and Commonwealth universities. Unlike most British women's campus novels which make no mention of race, regardless of the rising statistical presence of both students and staff of color, these texts help reveal the circular pattern of privilege and denial many Black woman face in the academy. On the one hand, it seems to extend opportunity, privilege, advancement, and reward to those women who are fortunate enough to enter higher education as professionals; but on the other hand, this entry exposes them to racism, isolation, othering, and exclusion to the point where they question their accomplishments and their very identities until they feel forced to leave the UK or academia altogether. On the surface, this resulting absence implies a lack of interest in, and involvement with, higher education for BME women. Their invisibility implies that UK BME women are not a demographic that can or even needs to be studied or analyzed. Such lack of attention allows current racist attitudes and practices to remain in place, which further alienates more and more BME women as they try to enter the academy and make it their professional home. Ultimately, higher education remains a double-edged sword for many Black women academics in the UK. Hopefully, we will see new novels from the UK dealing with these important issues.

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[76] Pat Ellis, "Education and Women's Place in Caribbean Society," in *Women of the Caribbean*, ed. Pat Ellis, (London: Zed Books, 1986), 91-100.

[77] Gregory, "The Cultural Constructs of Race," 349.

[78] Hague, "Initiative to Tackle Racism," http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=165832.

[79] Thompson, "Who Goes There," 128.