

Sample student assignment by Isabelle Asghar-Williams
3rd year student in Race and Ethnicity in Society module in academic year 2021-22

“More British than the British”: A Critical Reflection of Small Axe: Red, White and Blue

Defiant, but confused, Leroy said to his disappointed Jamaican father: “You wanted us more British than the British.”

On watching ‘*Red, White and Blue*’, an episode from Small Axe’s anthology of films detailing the experiences of the West Indian community in London, we are immediately introduced to the Black-British Logan family. Son Leroy’s decision to join the police, in the abandonment of studying forensics, commands the storyline. We witness the conflict this causes between Leroy and his father, Kenneth, and the conflict Leroy experiences from his racist white colleagues, despite his efforts to assimilate and succeed. The racist environment of the 1980s is clear—between soft cell’s ‘Tainted Love’ and the questionable décor, I assumed this was the time era. The 1970s and 1980s were still afflicted by racists like Enoch Powell, calling for a ‘bloody’ racial war, and were riddled with anxieties about Black youth criminality (Gilroy, 1992.)

Although, throughout ‘*Red, White and Blue*’, what led me to think deeply about the more intricate ways racism affects ethnic minorities, was the way individuals were portrayed to behave and uphold strict values. In the following reflection, I intersperse personal observations and reflections on the episode with theoretical understandings. I consider how the Logan family’s behaviour contrasts with White characters in the episode, and express how I feel this speaks volumes about the expectations of ethnic minorities to conform to social construction ideas of ‘Britishness’ and ‘Whiteness.’ I also comment on language which enforces this difference, language I know continues to be thrown around today. My interpretations relate strongly to conceptualisations of national identity, Whiteness, and racism.

An early scene of the Logan family playing scrabble provoked thought in me. Leroy’s young wife, adding the letters ‘e’ and ‘x’ onto an ‘s’ on the scrabble board, spelling out *sex*, prompted astonishment and disapproving glances from the Logan family. The scene may have been intended to convey Kenneth’s religiosity and strict nature. Yet for myself, I realised how this exchange illustrated the high moral standards of respectability the Logan family endeavoured to uphold, as a Black family in 1980s Britain, to present behaviour associated with Britishness and British nationality.

How often do we joke about the prudish, over-apologising, ‘stiff-upper-lip’ British personality? But this seemingly benign national identity represents characteristics, such as propriety, reserve, and respectability. These, contribute to a hegemonic, exclusively White British identity that is constructed to be more civilised than any other (Clarke, 2021.) Gilroy (1992), in writing on race and nation, acutely titled his

book *'Ain't no Black in the Union Jack'*, explaining that 'racist logics' behind nationhood denies Black individuals from aligning themselves with British nationality. I feel this leaves minorities with the responsibility to adapt and overcome these barriers of racism. From my view, the Logan family's behaviour and taught values exemplified 'acculturation strategies', designed to align themselves with the majority culture (Clarke, 2021; Nandi and Platt, 2014.) I discovered there is very little research on acculturation from minority perspectives.

Small Axe encouraged me to reflect on my own understandings of acculturation and the choices made to assimilate. Upon leaving Pakistan and arriving in Coventry in 1962, my Nana and Papi refused to teach my dad and his brothers a word of Urdu: hoping this would solidify their English identity and detract from their Pakistani ethnicity. I remembered my surprise, and in honesty, a degree of disappointment, in learning that my educated grandparents wanted their children to blend in with their white British peers, to excel. Perhaps the most unpleasant element of acculturation, was that it involved minorities distancing themselves from their own culture.

Kenneth's fictional character illuminates' immigrants' aspirations for their children, he taught his son to "study every hour god sends" and not to "mix with the Black kids." Minorities acculturating to succeed, I painfully believe, demonstrates an awareness that 'Whiteness' carries power and privilege (Garner, 2012.) Clarke (2021) and Garner (2012) explained that moral aspects of British identity, ideals of 'self-mastery' and 'civility', are clearly attached to constructed Whiteness. Resultingly, minorities hoping to progress in contemporary English society appear to embark on a 'Whitening process', attempting to prove their character as morally deserving.

To think that earlier last year, a report claimed the UK is '*not deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities*', is outrageous to me (BBC News, 2021.) The report's quantitative approach to studying racism completely overlooked the insidious ways racist constructions impact minorities at an intensely personal level – something I know is unmeasurable in this way. Surely, for instance, it is easy to count the increasing number of 'BAME' individuals in the police, but this gives us no understanding of the sacrifices made and how they have possibly altered their behaviour to reach that position.

In Kenneth and Leroy's racist experiences with the police, I regard that the episode truthfully exposes how minority individuals working to embody dominant values and ideals, are still not guaranteed acceptance or safety. In assimilating to the extent his father taught him to, joining the police and aspiring to change attitudes from within; Leroy is accused of betraying his minority community whilst being treated with hostility by those he works with. Labelled "coconut" by black children, he becomes too White for his ethnic minority community. Labelled "n*igger" by his colleagues, he is too Black to be accepted by the majority. Caught between a rock and a hard place, the language from each community clarifies the impossible position that Leroy, and

other ethnic minorities, find themselves in. I hope to understand myself, how minorities seeking change manage to tread the line between assimilating to progress, whilst resisting prejudice.

Having heard '*coconut*' thrown at me and teased between others for the first time in college, I was reassured by peers that the term was light-hearted and inoffensive. After thinking further on the word and its meaning, someone of colour 'acting White'; I felt sure it could not be anything other than pejorative. Should we genuinely contemplate whether people of colour are White on the inside, or act as Black or Brown as their skin colour portrays them to be? What does 'acting Black' even mean? It is frustrating that White people enjoy the privilege of not having their behaviour continually scrutinised. The fact that '*coconut*' is still in regular use today; worse, between minorities; signifies that nothing has changed. Racialised ideas of behavioural difference, are evidently socially entrenched.

"You wanted us more British than the British" declared Leroy arguing with Kenneth. This statement revealed a moment of clarity for me. I understood its immediate meaning, that Kenneth had desired Leroy to live up to a British standard he believed was necessary to progress. Although, in flicking back to re-watch the scene, reflecting for days about the deeper meaning of the simple statement, I concluded it held some alternative truth. In Leroy being pushed to become 'more British' than his White counterparts, Leroy had succeeded in surpassing this ideal. I find this is evident in the illuminating contrast between Leroy's nature and the White British characters. Leroy is polite, hard-working, PhD educated and respectful of authority: embodying the characteristics attributed with Whiteness. In juxtaposition, the White cockney characters in the police appear apathetic, ignorant and demonstrate racist behaviour ranging from underhandedness to extreme violence. It is my belief, clear in these dynamics, that Leroy's declaration about being 'more British than the British', was actually quite true. Leroy, by all standards, is morally superior. The ideal of Britishness is an ideal that the British fail to live up to themselves.

It is obvious to me, that ideas about skin colour, race or *British* nationality carrying inherent meanings about the way people behave, is arbitrary. *Small Axe* reminded me of Stuart Hall's video on cultural signifiers, which I fell in love with. He emphasises the meaninglessness of colour, and its existence as a social construct (ChallengingMedia, 2006). Seemingly, the constructed White, British ideal exists to legitimise the White majority's dominance and exclude people of colour who do not appear to live up to its false standard.

With this in mind, I cannot believe the number of occasions I have heard my Papi name Britain the "best place to live on earth" and in his words, the "most civilised." His experience of Britain is not rose-tinted: my grandparents have been denied jobs and verbally abused. Despite this, his gratefulness and his appreciation of British culture is unmatched: I believe he is more genuinely admiring of British culture than any White individual I know.

I feel there is little appreciation for the lengths minority ethnic families go to, to be accepted and progress, in a hostile society. The implications of racism on micro, behavioural levels is something that deserves full attention. Minorities' positions remain precarious. I observe political and media attention only shining a light on ethnic minority communities when they are blamed for the negative actions of a few. I am tired of defending the wrongdoings of people of colour. Whilst their behaviour is criticised and scrutinised, Leroy represents ethnic minority individuals who are shockingly grateful for opportunities in Britain, and remain resilient against prejudice, in the hope to change things from within this racist society.

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