JAMAICA IN FICTION VS. JAMAICA IN REALITY: DUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF COLONIAL SPACE IN *THE FRAUD* BY ZADIE SMITH

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Abstract :

Zadie Smith's The Fraud presents a profound examination of colonial representation through its deliberate juxtaposition of "Jamaica in Fiction" and "Jamaica in Reality." This paper analyzes how Smith constructs these dual representations to expose the mechanisms by which colonial powers obscured the violence underpinning their economic systems. The novel reveals how Victorian literature transformed Jamaica from a site of human suffering into an aestheticized backdrop for adventure tales, where picturesque watercolors and fictional narratives systematically erased the brutality of plantation society. In stark contrast, the testimony of Andrew Bogle provides a counter-narrative that exposes the dehumanizing reality of slavery, where human beings were reduced to commodities in colonial records. Through this structural contrast, Smith demonstrates how England functioned as "an elaborate alibi" for actions taken elsewhere, and how colonial fiction served material interests by maintaining the illusion of civilized order while obscuring exploitation. The paper argues that The Fraud positions Bogle's dignified testimony as a necessary corrective to colonial storytelling, suggesting that true decolonization requires not only political change but narrative revolution—creating space for those whose stories have been systematically excluded from the historical record. Ultimately, the novel reveals that the fraud of colonial representation was not merely inaccurate storytelling but a deliberate strategy of power with enduring consequences.

Keywords : *The Fraud*, Zadie Smith, Colonial representation, Dual narratives, Jamaica, Epistemic violence, Plantation space, Narrative fraud.

Introduction :

Zadie Smith's *The Fraud* presents a complex exploration of colonial narratives through its dual representations of Jamaica—both as an imagined space in Victorian literature and as a site of brutal colonial reality. The novel deliberately structures this contrast through explicit chapter titles like "Jamaica, in Fiction" and "Jamaica, in Reality," signaling Smith's intention to interrogate how colonial powers constructed narratives that obscured the violence underpinning their economic systems. Through characters like Andrew Bogle, whose testimony reveals the lived experience of Jamaican slavery, and William Ainsworth, whose fictional depictions ignore contemporary Jamaican realities, Smith creates a narrative tension that exposes the mechanisms of colonial storytelling. This paper examines how *The Fraud*

establishes a critical dialogue between these dual representations, revealing how fiction functioned as both an instrument of colonial fantasy and, in rare instances, a potential space for counter-narrative.

The Picturesque Fantasy: Jamaica as Literary Construct :

Smith meticulously dissects the Victorian literary tradition that transformed Jamaica from a site of human suffering into an aestheticized backdrop for adventure tales. The novel references James Hakewill's *A Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica*, noting how abolitionists would hold up this volume "as an example of how a charnel house may be depicted as a very paradise" (Smith 257). This visual representation exemplifies what Catherine Hall describes as the "imperial gaze" that systematically erased the violence of plantation society from colonial imagery (Hall 112). The novel's protagonist, Mrs. Touchet, recognizes this dissonance when she observes: "This postcard portrait she recognized at once. A Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica by James Hakewill. Crossley had sent them a handsome first edition, years ago, and she had sat with Frances in the old drawing room at The Elms, turning over the pages of plantation watercolours, marvelling at how a charnel house may be depicted as a very paradise" (Smith 257).

William Ainsworth's fictional representation of Jamaica functions similarly, serving as what Edward Said would term "imaginative geography"—a process by which colonial powers define and control territories through narrative construction (Said 49). When Ainsworth attempts to write his "Jamaican novel," the island appears only "buried under the weight of an entangling plot like a bobbin at the bottom of a sewing box" (Smith 258). The novel explicitly critiques this approach: "The strangest thing about it all was that he should call it his 'Jamaican novel'. [...] For Jamaica turned out to be the secret birthplace of Hilary's secret mother" (Smith 258). This reduction of Jamaica to a mere plot device exemplifies what Anne McClintock identifies as the "fetishization of the colonial space," where actual places and peoples become symbolic elements in European narratives (McClintock 134).

Mrs. Touchet's assessment of England as "an elaborate alibi" further develops this critique: "England was not a real place at all. England was an elaborate alibi. Nothing real happened in England. Only dinner parties and boarding schools and bankruptcies. Everything else, everything the English really did and really wanted, everything they desired and took and used and discarded– all of that they did elsewhere" (Smith 272). This observation aligns with Robert Young's concept of "colonial alibis," where metropolitan centers constructed narratives that absolved them of responsibility for colonial violence by framing such actions as occurring in distant, abstract spaces (Young 87).

The Unseen Reality: Jamaica as Site of Suffering :

In stark contrast to these fictional representations, *The Fraud* presents Jamaica through the testimony of Andrew Bogle, whose narrative reveals the brutal reality obscured by picturesque depictions. Bogle's account of his father's transportation from Africa establishes a counter-narrative that directly challenges the colonial fantasy: "The ship was called the King David. It sailed to Bristol and then on to the harbour in Kingston, Jamaica, leaving behind the life I should have known" (Smith 301). This testimony exemplifies what Michelle Stephens

describes as "counter-testimony," where formerly silenced voices reclaim narrative authority (Stephens 76).

Smith structures Bogle's narrative to emphasize the systematic dehumanization of enslaved people. His official record appears as a stark bureaucratic entry: "Andrew Bogle Black 25 Creole Taken off the Country by Edw: Tichborne: Esq FROM THE SLAVE LIST OF THE HOPE ESTATE, SAINT ANDREW, JAMAICA, 1826" (Smith 300). This reduction of a human being to a commodity listing represents what Saidiya Hartman identifies as the "afterlife of slavery"—the ways in which enslaved people were systematically transformed into objects within colonial documentation (Hartman 5). Bogle's personal narrative works against this dehumanization, restoring complexity to a life rendered as mere data in colonial records.

The novel particularly emphasizes the psychological violence of slavery through Bogle's description of plantation life: "Women, men, children, babies. Generation after generation. His father. His mother. The noble line of Johannas. Ground down. Minds ploughed. Bodies mangled. Souls boiled until they evaporated. Human fuel. Round and round went the treadmill. A hundred years? Two? The philosophical stable boy had claimed three. Cut the people down, plant new ones in the holes" (Smith 265). This passage reveals what Katherine McKittrick calls "the anti-black geographies" of plantation spaces—systems designed to exploit and destroy Black bodies while maintaining the illusion of civilized order (McKittrick 45).

Smith further develops this counter-narrative through Bogle's reflections on the limitations of English understanding: "Every evening, in the newspapers, the tale of this negro uprising expanded, and Mr Doughty expressed some variation on his relief to no longer be in any way involved with the 'cursed sugar trade'. Bogle snuck the newspaper back to his quarters after dark and read the long columns by the light of a single candle, trying to understand if only the north coast was burning and who exactly was being executed in the town squares for refusing to work. But of all the negroes in Jamaica there was only one with a name, as far as The Times was concerned – Sam Sharpe – and after a while he understood that he was only upsetting himself. What he wanted to know no English paper would ever tell him" (Smith 312). This passage illustrates what Brent Hayes Edwards describes as "the opacity of the archive"—the systematic erasure of Black perspectives from official historical records (Edwards 112).

The Governor Eyre Controversy: Reality Intruding on Fiction :

The novel's treatment of the Governor Eyre controversy provides a crucial intersection point where the realities of Jamaican colonial violence intrude upon English consciousness. When discussing Governor Eyre's brutal suppression of the Morant Bay rebellion, the character known as "the Targe" declares: "Even by the low standards of martial law, the Gordon case is a stain upon the name of British justice! Tried in mere hours, denied counsel– and hanged from the rafters of a Jamaican courthouse? If that is not murder I do not know what is" (Smith 263). This historical episode becomes a narrative fulcrum where the novel examines how English society processed (or failed to process) colonial violence.

Smith reveals the English tendency to minimize Jamaican suffering through the character Fanny Ainsworth, who dismisses the controversy as causing unnecessary division: "'I know of his story I was told by Peachey, who worked first in the mill house and then the

boiling house, and came from my father's village. Peachey outlived my mother and my father. For all I know she lives still. Peachey was not her true name, any more than Nonesuch was my father's name, but so they were called, on Hope, where I was born'" (Smith 264). This perspective exemplifies what Catherine Hall identifies as "the will to ignorance" that characterized much of Victorian England's relationship to its colonies—deliberate disengagement from uncomfortable truths (Hall 203).

The novel further explores this dynamic through Mrs. Touchet's reflections on the limitations of abolitionist literature: "a soul did not live long enough to see paradise lost– paradise never achieved! For despite all the efforts of the Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves– despite abolition itself– the passage of thirty years did not appear to have made Hakewill's charming watercolours a reality. The recent news from that benighted island was discouraging, to say the least. Civil unrest, a bloody uprising, a state of emergency, and Governor Eyre disgraced: accused of mass brutality, summary executions. None of which as much as grazed the pages of William's novel. There the fantasies of 1820 persisted" (Smith 273). This passage reveals the gap between abolitionist hopes and post-emancipation realities, a theme Paul Burra develops in *After Slavery: The Negro Question in Victorian England* (Burra 156).

Bogle's Testimony as Counter-Narrative

Andrew Bogle's courtroom testimony represents the novel's most powerful intervention against colonial fiction. His measured, dignified presence contrasts sharply with the sensationalized depictions of Jamaica in popular literature. When questioned about his age and origins, Bogle responds with simple, factual statements that carry profound historical weight: "I am 64. Are you a native of Jamaica? Yes. Do you recollect, when you were about 11 years of age, the late Mr Edward Tichborne? I do" (Smith 299). This testimony exemplifies what Deborah Thomas calls "counter-archives"—alternative historical records created by those excluded from official documentation (Thomas 89).

Smith structures Bogle's testimony to highlight the contradictions in colonial narratives. When asked about his service to Edward Tichborne, Bogle states plainly: "He sent me with messages. And it ended in your being taken as page. And did you continue as page as long as he remained in Jamaica? Yes. And when he returned to England did you return with him as page? Yes" (Smith 300). These simple statements reveal the complex power dynamics of colonial service relationships that Victorian fiction typically glossed over or romanticized.

Bogle's narrative perspective also challenges the temporal disconnect that characterized most English representations of Jamaica. While English novels presented Jamaica as a static backdrop, Bogle's testimony spans decades, revealing the ongoing evolution of Jamaican society: "I know of his story I was told by Peachey, who worked first in the mill house and then the boiling house, and came from my father's village. Peachey outlived my mother and my father. For all I know she lives still. Peachey was not her true name, any more than Nonesuch was my father's name, but so they were called, on Hope, where I was born" (Smith 301). This historical continuity stands in stark contrast to the timeless, ahistorical Jamaica of Victorian fiction.

The Fraud of Colonial Representation

Ultimately, *The Fraud* reveals how colonial representations functioned as elaborate deceptions that served economic and political interests. The novel's title itself points to this central theme—colonial narratives as deliberate frauds that obscured reality. Mrs. Touchet's observation that "Fact and fiction meld in their minds. Songs William had written years earlier returned to the stage and were mistaken for history. How many Londoners still believed that Sheppard, waiting to be hung on the Tyburn gallows, sang to the waiting crowd: Nix my doll, pals, fake away...? Keep stealing, my friends! From life for fiction, and from fiction for life" (Smith 262) applies equally to representations of Jamaica.

Smith demonstrates how these fictional representations served material purposes. When discussing copyright issues, a character laments: "New rules apply. Good Chapman here binds my book and sells it: very good. Now what's to stop any Soho sneak from copying any section of it and selling it on his own account? Or slicing out Cruikshank's pictures, framing 'em, and making a pretty penny?" (Smith 282). This commentary on literary piracy parallels the economic exploitation of Jamaica itself—both involve the appropriation of others' labor for profit.

The novel's most profound critique comes through Mrs. Touchet's realization about the purpose of colonial fiction: "Why had William left it so late to imagine, in fiction, what reality itself had just foreclosed?" (Smith 261). This question reveals the fundamental fraud—the creation of fictional Jamaicas that deliberately ignored contemporary realities in favor of nostalgic, profitable narratives that maintained the colonial status quo.

Conclusion :

Zadie Smith's *The Fraud* critiques colonial representation by juxtaposing Victorian fantasies of picturesque Jamaica with the brutal realities in Andrew Bogle's testimony. This contrast exposes how colonial narratives functioned as "epistemic violence," systematically erasing subaltern voices to obscure imperial exploitation. Smith demonstrates these representations weren't merely inaccurate but essential alibis, actively serving the material interests underpinning Jamaica's oppression. Consequently, the novel argues that true decolonization demands a narrative revolution, creating space for counter-testimonies like Bogle's that challenge dominant historical fictions. *The Fraud* thus participates in the ethical project of bearing witness to historical trauma. It reveals colonial "fraud" as a deliberate strategy of power, not simple falsehood, which continues to shape historical understanding. Ultimately, the path to truth requires centering perspectives like Bogle's—those systematically excluded—a project that remains critically urgent today.

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