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MY CLEANER: HELP OR FOE?

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ABSTRACT. ***My Cleaner: Help or Foe?*** Maggie Gee's *My Cleaner* tackles the problem of racism and family life in the lives of two women who intend to support or "help" each other and end up bringing out the worst in each other. Profound racism and an acute sense of class difference alienate the two women: Vanessa Henman and Mary Tendo, her cleaner from Uganda. The theoretical background of the paper is offered by the theories of Paul Gilroy.

Keywords: *racism, clash of cultures, Uganda, London, blacks, whites, understanding, cosmopolitan.*

REZUMAT. ***Menajera mea: ajutor sau duşman?*** Romanul *Menajera mea* a lui Maggie Gee se ocupă de problema rasismului şi a familiei în vieţile a două femei care intenţionează să se sprijine sau să se "ajute" reciproc şi sfârşesc prin a aduce ceea ce e mai rău pentru fiecare. Rasismul profund şi un act simţ al diferenţei de clasă le alienează pe cele două femei: Vanessa Henman şi Mary Tendo, menajera ei din Uganda. Baza teoretică a acestei lucrări este oferită de către teoriile lui Paul Gilroy.

Cuvinte cheie*: rasism, confruntare între culturi, Uganda, Londra, negri, albi, înţelegere, cosmopolit.*

Maggie Gee's 2005 novel *My Cleaner* successfully tackles the subject of racism as well as the twist and turns of human relationships in the multicultural setting of London at the turn of the century. The novel also foregrounds power

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struggles, the interactions between people with particular emphasis on how various historical and socio-economic factors implicate ways in which characters relate to one another. Our analysis focuses on inter-cultural encounters and co-habitation using the work of Paul Gilroy, especially his conceptualization of "conviviality".

According to Gilroy, if we want to reorient the discussion on racial difference towards the future, we have to place a "higher value upon the cosmopolitan histories and transcultural experiences" (qtd in Bleiswicjk 6). In his widely celebrated *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* Gilroy defines conviviality as "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere (xi). He further suggests that

> [t]he challenge of being in the same present, of synchronizing difference and articulating cosmopolitan hope upward from below rather than imposing it downward … provides some help in seeing how we might invent conceptions of humanity that allow for the presumption of equal value and go beyond the issue of tolerance into a more active engagement with the irreducible value of diversity within sameness (75).

In *The Cleaner*, Maggie Gee critically analyzes the dynamics of what Gilroy calls "convivial culture" with reference to the relationship between whites and blacks in contemporary London. Instead of writing the novel from the perspective of a white author, she employs two alternating points of view: that of the white "liberal" Vanessa and that of the Ugandan Mary Tendo. Gee's interest in the inter-cultural encounter and its discontents is also noted by Elif Özbatak Avcı who observes:

> Gee engages in her fiction with the social, political and cultural problems suffered particularly by disadvantaged social groups, and wrestles with liberal complacencies as well as the assumptions underpinning the compartmentalization she points out (478).

So, one of Gee's main targets in *My Cleaner* is the self-deception of the white liberals, represented by Vanessa, in a cosmopolitan setting still riddled with inter-racial and inter-cultural conflict.

Vanessa Henman is a white, middle class, single woman living in London. In the words of Kılıç, Vanessa is

> a product of British supermarket culture. As the one-eyed writer in the land of the divorcee, of single parents, fat children, lost children,

> depression, yoga classes, de-tox, diets, ex-husbands, self-help books and friendships maintained on the phone, Vanessa is far from the romantic idea of an author (142).

She prioritizes her career as a college lecturer and writer over her role as a mother and finds little time for her son Justin. She lives in a big empty house, too big for only two people, and tends to blame her ex-husband Trevor for the problems she currently has with her son. Justin, a gifted but depressed twenty-two year old young man who seems to love and connect with Mary, the cleaner/nanny who brought him up, more than with members of his own family.

Mary Tendo was employed as Vanessa's cleaner in the past but returned to her native Uganda many years ago. She is now living in Kampala as a Makarere University graduate. She is devoted to her son Jamil whom her Libyan ex-husband took to Tripoli and who is now missing. She is, at the same time, a woman who is comfortable in her own skin and proud to be African. She makes it abundantly clear that she does not feel inferior to the Europeans, which clearly shows in her conversations with Vanessa. She frequently makes the point that the Europeans are trapped in their superficial and consumerist lifestyle which she finds to be devoid of meaning. As an intelligent, warm, and humorous woman, she enjoys life and is grateful for everything she has. Struggling in her efforts to connect with her severely depressed son Justin, Vanessa writes a desperate letter to Mary asking her to come back to England to work for her once again, this time as a "nanny" to Justin. Mary accepts the offer, primarily for financial reasons although it becomes clear that she deeply loves Justin as well.

The clash between the two women is used by Gee to explore racism and class conflict. Although they may appear to be very different people from the outside, they gradually discover their similarities. A writer and a cleaner may appear, to an outsider, to have very opposing identities but the reality is quite different. Nobody knows this better than Gee who used to teach fiction writing classes and worked as a cleaner to make some money during her university years.

The story focuses on the complex relationship between these two women. The self-confident and lively Mary is in a stark contrast to the cold, insecure, and self-centered Vanessa. It is significant that Gee portrays Vanessa and Mary not simply as individuals but also as representative figures whose perceptions and outlook on life reveal important insights into their home culture. The reader is invited to compare and contrast the life of a white working mother in London with that of an African mother working in Uganda and England. In this context, the book also tackles important contemporary issues including the difficulties inherent in inter-cultural and inter-personal communication, the clash of perceptions and cultures, as well as possible

challenges and opportunites posed by the salience of globalism. The continuing legacy of colonialism and imperialism, especially with regard to its relationship with racism and the persistence of economic inequalities, is also treated with great attention throughout the book.

In her examination of the banal cosmopolitan conviviality in Maggie Gee's *My Cleaner* and Tessa Hadley's *The London Train*, Johansen offers the following analysis:

> Significantly, both novels – in their attention to a shift from the welfare state to the neoliberal state, and the parallel shift from the village to the city – resist a vision of multicultural history and interaction that can be reduced to increased exposure to and passive tolerance of difference, suggesting instead that a subject's (and, implicitly, the nation- state's) response to alterity is indexed to the pervasive logic of neoliberal capital (296).

In other words, the relationship between the financially secure but emotionally troubled Vanessa and the "lower class" black woman Mary who comes from a postcolonial developing country, cannot be divorced from the wider socio-economic context.

Situating her characters and their interaction within a wider socio-historical framework, Gee suggests that it is impossible to accurately understand and evaluate Vanessa and Mary's relationship without taking into account the history of colonialism and imperial policies that have brought about economic disparities on a global scale. In brief, the poverty experienced in countries like Uganda (that forces people like Mary to work abroad) as well as the exploitation of foreign workers in the so-called First World is intimately linked with the political and economic power dynamics that shape the lives of millions. This background is also vital in understanding the roots of racial tension that underlies the perception and responses of both characters. A careful reading of *My Cleaner*, especially the chapters written from Mary Tendo's perspective, shows that the interwined issues of race/politics/history remain relevant in understanding our world today despite the fact that the period of institutionalised racism and colonialism is officially over. Through her intensive interrogation of these issues, Gee uses her literary imagination to inquire ways of dealing with alterity and living with it. As Gilroy aptly remarks:

> [w]e need to know what sorts of insight and reflection might actually help increasingly differentiated societies and anxious individuals to cope successfully with the challenges involved in dwelling comfortably in proximity to the unfamiliar without becoming fearful and hostile (3).

Gee's concerns in *My Cleaner* are very much in tune with Gilroy's observations and they support them.

The relationship between Vanessa and Mary, especially the power struggle in their interactions, should be examined against this backdrop. Racism and class difference inform their relationship, so the clash between the two women draws attention to the problems inherent in inter-personal communication as well as to racial issues. In this sense, Maggie Gee's *My Cleaner* is an interesting examination of the shifting power dynamics between a black Ugandan cleaner and a white European housewife. Despite the conflict and obvious differences between these characters, Gee's avowed aim is to assert the idea that we are all equal. In her words:

> I do believe that empathy and sympathy between people are possible. So there is a basis for trying to imagine each other; for writing across geographical, gender and cultural barriers. And I see that act not as colonisation but on the contrary as a belief in our essential equality (17).

Thus, Gee writes not only to reveal differences of opinion and outlook between people but also to promote mutual understanding by means of cultivating sympathy and empathy.

Towards that end of the novel, Gee takes care to highlight the similarities between the two main characters as well. Nothwithstanding their differences in terms of character, background and outlook on life, Vanessa and Mary also have certain things in common. Both women are deeply fond of their sons, they want to write about their childhoods and to connect with their roots. This stance is very much in tune with Gilroy's suggestion that we should relinquish the focus on racial difference which "obstructs empathy and makes ethnocentricism inescapable" (63).

Maggie Gee also examines the identity of authorship. "Vanessa is the "parody author" whose public image is constructed by the politics of the literary market" (Kılıç 142). Vanessa gives creative writing classes, but the only book she has co-authored is: *The Long Lean Line: Pilates for Everyone*. The only book mentioned to have been read by her is: *Salads for life. How to Make a Mixed Salad.* Vanessa does not take any pleasure from writing and in fact she considers her writing classes take up much of her time and they are an utter waste of time. On the other hand, Mary writes her texts unnoticed in the midst of household chores. Vanessa and her son cannot really associate authorship with Mary because of their racial and class prejudices. For instance, when Justin who wants to play the Hangman game with Mary, she says: "Perhaps Later, Justin, I'm writing something", at which he foolishly responds by asking: " Is it

a shopping list?" (296). In contrast to Vanessa, Mary writes because she genuinely enjoys it. To quote Kılıç: "Mary enjoys a spontaneous act of writing as a natural flow of experiences and memories, like 'unravelling ribbon'transcribed into the text" (147).

In her own comment on the book, Gee suggests, "I was writing about how both characters are dealing with difference, looking across a boundary category that at times collide them to each other" (15-16). Thus, a major authorial concern is how people of different racial/cultural backgrounds engage one another and how the process of engaging difference implicates their conceptualization of their selves. As a white English woman Gee also has worries concerning her ability to imagine the inner feelings of Mary Tendo, a black woman from Uganda. She asks herself, "Did I have the right to inhabit Mary Tendo's mind? Would I get it wrong? Could I *be* Mary, in the first person?" (16).

In *Writing the Condition-of-England Novel* Mine Özyurt Kılıç suggests that Gee's *My Cleaner* and its sequel *My Driver* are about "the intense antagonism between different subjects and about the state of Britain in transnational times, they go far beyond a simple portrayal of opposing conditions through their use of, in Gee's words, 'the chemistry between' their writer characters" (140-141). Kılıç further argues that these books are perfect examples of migrant literature "characterized by a shift, or shifts, in identity as its essential feature" (141). I would add that, in this context, multicultural/cosmopolitan London functions as a contact zone where such transformative encounters take place. The book starts with Mary's birthday. She goes to the post office and collects a letter from Vanessa, her former employer, who is calling her back to England. Vanessa apparently has serious problems with her son Justin, who used to feel closer to Mary than her mother. Right after Vanessa informs Justin that she wrote a letter to Mary, Justin says:

> 'It's the fourth of July. It's Mary's birthday'. He suddenly smiles a radiant smile, and colour returns to his big, loose mouth, ana his cheeks lift, and he is very handsome; but his pointless happiness enrages Vanessa. 'How can he *posssibly* remember?' Suddenly he irritates her beyond bearing, his great pale nakedness, his soft sulky voice, his haywire corona of uncut yellow curls, the fact he is here in her study in the morning when normally he sleeps until four pm, his ridiculous pretence of remembering Mary's birthday – When only a few weeks ago, he forgot his mother's. She sits and stares at him, vibrating faintly, wondering if he really is her son. (11)

This quotation shows the extent to which mother and son are estranged from each other and how deeply Justin still cares for Mary even after so many

years since she left. Even the thought of Mary cheers him up and makes him feel much better. Vanessa, on the other hand, has difficulty understanding and tolerating Justin's obvious fondness for Mary. It is clear that she is very jealous of her and angry that Justin values Mary more than his own mother. The enduring bond between Justin and Mary enrages Vanessa, which means that writing to Mary, begging her to come back must have been a difficult thing for Vanessa to do. On the other hand, Vanessa had no other choice than writing to Mary since Justin stays in his room the whole day and suffers from severe depression. He believes only Mary can help him out of this anguished mental state. Thus, Vanessa is literally forced to write to Mary although the two did not get on very well in the past. Recalling the first time she met Vanessa, Mary observes:

> I went round to see her smiling, smiling. She shook my hands as we were equals. (I was never equal to the people I cleaned for). I knew all about them, all their dirtiness, the secret habits that no one else knew, the places they left snot, or sanitary towels, the fruit they left to mouldering the bins meant for paper. So I was suspicious (32).

Mary believes that although white people may charge blacks with dirtiness, whites themselves are much dirtier in reality. In fact, when Mary wanted to bring her son Jamil to stay with Justin, Vanessa's son, Vanessa was not pleased with the idea, thinking that Jamil could infect Justin. Behind Mary's explicitly condescending attitude towards the white people she worked for is the recognition of racial and class difference. In fact, Mary is not their equal, but rather their superior. As a black maid, Mary has been treated by her white employers as inferior so she feels rightly suspicious when Vanessa approaches her *as if* they were equals. Mary is perceptive enough to know that despite Vanessa's seemingly cordial manners, neither of them considers this relationship as one between equals.

Mary Tendo's account of her life in England is full of many other examples showing that decolonization has, by no means, led to the emergence of a culture of equality:

> The British Empire was already just a memory. And yet, these Office workers were still our masters. They never knew us or talked to us, but we knew about them, from their wastepaper baskets. I wanted to arrive in a suit, as they did, and drink the coffee from the coffee machine, and use their phones to call my family, and drop old chewing-gum like them, as if the ground would swallow it up. I wanted those people to know my name. (We had names for them, too, they knew nothing about: 'Hair Shedder', 'Sticky Pants', 'Snot Finger'). (17)

Mary draws attention to the legacy of colonialism that has survived the demise of official colonisation. The British may no longer be the colonial masters, yet they are still the ruling class. From the perspective of a subaltern like Mary, it is poignantly clear that white people still consider themselves superior to the people of colour, especially if they are working class. In this sense, Mary's account reads like a detailed story of the trials and tribulations of an immigrant worker trying to survive in an unfriendly environment. This quotation also reveals Mary's longing to be treated humanely, that is as an equal to white people. She desires to have what they have, and most of all, she desires to be acknowledged as an individual.

Ultimately, the given circumstances of people's background have significant bearing on their definition of themselves as individuals and implicate interpersonal relations. To be more precise, Mary's identity as a black working class individual from a post-colonial developing country shapes the nature of her interaction with Vanessa, a white well-off woman from England. Recalling her days in England, Mary maintains that

> I did my work like the other foreigners, cleaning the offices of the sleeping English. They arrived, yawning, as we went for our breakfast, we hundreds of thousands of people from the empire. (They say that Uganda was not part of the empire, they say it was just a 'protectorate', which makes me laugh! Protecting us from what? From the other competing *bazungu* empires) (17).

An intelligent and educated woman, Mary has the ability to critically evaluate the colonial period and challenge its myths. She is fully aware of her position in England as an ex-colonial immigrant worker, she feels solidarity with fellow immigrant workers, but does not see it as her inescapable destiny. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, she openly calls into question and challenges the enduring presence of colonial attitudes and the injustice they breed. When she comes back to England, her determination to resituate herself in this world is obvious in her every thought and move.

The novel focuses on the idea that changing circumstances can bring about reconfiguration of positions in relationships. In this vein, Mary seems to be in a much more advantageous position the second time she comes to England. She needs the money but if necessary she can find another place, whereas Vanessa cannot find another "Mary Tendo" who has a special place in Justin's heart. Vanessa and Mary's interaction suggests that human relationships are shaped by shifting power dynamics. When people realize that they have the upper hand, they will try to assert their dominance over people who are in a weaker position. In an interesting reversal of conventional roles, Mary - the working

class ex-colonial - has the powerful position in this case. Mary Tendo knows that Vanessa, her former mistress, needs her desperately, so she will use this newly-gained power to bargain for better conditions for herself; both socially and financially. In the end Mary Tendo agrees to work for Vanessa for 500 pounds, which for Mary is a huge sum. She is delighted that her financial expectations are met by her employer because now she can save a considerable amount of money.

Mary, a subaltern, can find a voce in this case because the changing social circumstances allow her to have the upper hand. One must not forget that Mary is an educated, intelligent, woman: she knows how to adapt to and profit from changing circumstances. Not always can the subaltern find such favorable political and social conditions. It is telling that Vanessa attributes Mary's assertiveness about money not only to the latter's more confident, bossier new self but also to her being African:

> Of course money is problematic, with Africans. They don't understand that we borrow everything, that we are poor in a different way. That my house cost me more than she can earn in a lifetime. They never understand we have money troubles, too. That life in London is hideously expensive. I suppose it is a failure of imagination (45).

Although she is an educated, intellectual woman, Vanessa's perspective is shaped by stereotypical notions about Africans. As a particularly narrow-minded and arrogant individual, Vanessa is in for a very difficult time with the more assertive and self-confident Mary. The difference between Mary and Vanessa comes out more overtly in their understanding of the notion of "family". For Vanessa, family is the nuclear family consisting of parents and children. In fact, Vanessa's family consists only of her son and herself, whereas for Mary, family means extended family, including parents, children, uncles, aunts, grandparents, etc. Mary also despises Vanessa as a mother. She believes that Vanessa has raised her son to be always dependant on her and denied him the opportunity to find his individual identity. On the contrary, Mary urges Vanessa's sone to have closer relations with his father and develop a more independent identity.

It is also significant that Mary does not consider herself to be simply a cleaner, she tells Vanessa, "I was your cleaner once but not anymore" (155). Fully aware of her significance in the eyes of Justin and, thus, of Vanessa, she renegotiates new terms for her employment, going as far as to suggest that Vanessa should find herself a new cleaner. Since she considers herself a companion, a healer for Justin, Mary makes the point that she should be treated differently and receive the respect she rightly deserves. Whereas Mary wants to rise on the social scale just like Vanessa, the latter still sees Mary Tendo as a

simple cleaner. This is an important point of contention and causes tension between the two women.

The novel explores at some length various competing attitudes of the whites and the blacks on several subjects, including love, health, freedom, money and work ethic. Love, or rather different perceptions of love, is one of the major issues that Gee examines in the novel. Mary Tendo is portrayed as having a more mature and grounded personality, a fact that probably accounts for her ability (and capacity) to love others in a relatively disinterested and selfless fashion. Vanessa surely loves her son, but her love seems to be of the egoistical/self-centered kind which privileges her wants over his needs.

In general, the novel depicts white people as more attached to things than people. Vanessa wants to be closer to her son, but she doesn't allow him to come near her when she is working. Lacking insight and understanding, she is trapped in her narrow views and fails to connect with her son. The absence of proper parental support and guidance is certainly a very important factor that must have contributed to Justin's depression. When Mary first arrives in their home, Vanessa gradually feels that he seems to love her more than herself and his aunties. Anxious and jealous of Justin's strong emotional attachment to Mary, she reminds him that Mary "is only a paid help". When Justin asks her who aunt Isabel is, Vanessa can't believe that her son has forgotten his Godmother. Justin observes: "I only see Aunt Becky at Christmas. Why don't you pay them, too?". Then he says something that makes the matters worse: "Why hasn't any one paid you to love me?"(47). This question alone is revealing in that it shows how disconnected mother and son have become. In stark contrast to the cold and distant Vanessa, Mary is warm and understanding in her attitude toward Justin and his love for Zakira. Mary tries to help Justin and his girfriend. She recalls her feelings for Omar, remembers what it was like to be in love. She tries to help the young couple by visiting the girl's house and arranging a meeting for them. She tries to smooth the misunderstanding between the couple and urges Justin to accept his responsibility towards his lover and unborn child. She also helps Justin regain his confidence and self-esteem. The scene when they are trapped in snow is a good example. Mary says:

> Justin I want you to listen to me. I need to sleep for an hour or two. Probably, the traffic isn't going to move but if it does, you will have to do the driving. Mary, he whines, in explosive panic, you have to be joking, you know I can't drive, my mother made you promise to look after me. Yes, says Mary nineteen years ago. But now it is over. You are no longer a baby. I do not have to look after you. Now, I shall get out, so you can take over (308).

Unlike Vanessa who still sees Justin as a dependent weakling, Mary tries to bring out the best in Justin by pushing his limits.

The clash of cultures is one of the important themes of the book. Mary believes that Africans prefer life in the open, whereas the English are more secretive and hypocritical. According to her:

> The English houses are like lost worlds, detached from each other, overgrown with plants, and strangled with secrets. Whereas life in Kampala is lived outside. The houses there have, thin walls, and big windows, and quarrels and weddings are all out in the open, though sometime the people are beaten in secret. But here in London everything is secret (59).

Coming from a collectivist culture, Mary defines herself by relationships and disapproves of egotism. She has a hard time understanding the individualist culture of England and the individualist mindsets such cultures foster. In her mind, Vanessa is a perfect representative of this culture as she exclusively defines herself through her accomplishments and celebrates her 'independent' self. On the contrary, Vanessa looks down on the values and norms of collectivist cultures where identity is defined by social connections and solidarity. When Mary first meets Vanessa, she asks her where her family is. Vanessa is initially puzzled at this question and then starts laughing: "You are from Africa, of course. This is a single-parent family. That means, it is just me and my boy. Women like me rather like it that way" (32). Mary is perceptive enough to gather the meaning of "women like me". When Vanessa said this phrase, she

> meant modern women, not African women with too many children and aunts and sisters and grandparents. I thought, well somewhere there must be a father, unless this woman is the Virgin Mary, but I said nothing, only smiled politely, and looked at her as if I admired her. (But how can you be happy not to have a family?) (32).

As such exchanges show, racial prejudice abounds in the novel as both white people and black people resort to different modes of 'othering' and 'stereotyping'. White people tend to look down on the blacks thinking they are backward, whereas blacks despise the whites because they are not in tune with their bodies and their environment. Whereas the white man seeks to assert his dominance over nature in his pursuit of possessions and material wealth, Africans choose to live in harmony with nature since they value the bond between themselves and nature. Fully aware of her heritage, Mary Tendo, when leaving for her country, also thanks God that she is an African and reconfirms that the whites are not in tune with nature. She had read in a newspaper that Adam and Eve were Africans and she comments,

> So Adam and Eve belonged to us. I carried the cutting in my handbag, till the paper was yellow. It helped me to see their littleness. The little lives of the rich bazangue. They are rich and clear but are like swarming insects that cover the sun. They will fall away as the insects do. Thank God, I am an African woman (49).

Although Mary resents the power and material wealth the white people have, she clearly seems to think that the privileges they enjoy are undeserved. What's more, she finds their lack of awareness and short-sightedness pathetic. They may be wealthy, she reasons, but their materialistic attitude to life has not brought them happiness and peace of mind.

Another important issue explored in the novel is the differences between white and black people with regard to their attitude to work and money. Black people are portrayed as being willing and happy to work in any kind of job. On the other hand, white people can afford to be more picky. They consider certain jobs, such as housework, to be beneath them. In the words of Mary:

> All over the world, people live by cleaning. I did not understand this until I was in England. No one wants to touch used sanitary towels. These women take them out and forget about them. I do not suppose they do it on purpose ... But when I pray to Jesus, I pray against these women, I pray He will make them do their own dirty business (123).

Mary also believes that at the root of Justin's illness lies his inactivity, his staying idle at home without work. Thus, she urges him to start working with his father. Vanessa does not agree with this idea because she believes that this arrangement may gradually alienate her son from her. Governed by selfish motives, she wants her son to be always by her side. In this sense, she forgets that real love for one's children may sometimes demand a parent to forget about his own wishes and let children go away from the family.

In stark contrast to Vanessa, whose love for Justin seems to be more about 'keeping' him as her own even at the cost of his own good, for Mary loving is doing what is good for your children. Mary is an acute observer of her environment and offers an outsider's perspective on the British. She sees that they look pretty depressed and lonely and in that sense many of them seem to suffer from some kind of mental disorder. Although they live in a so-called first-world country, they cannot avoid feeling alienated and isolated. So she considers depression to be endemic in British society. Mary also recalls her first meeting with Justin. She got fond of him at once. She remembers, "The more I liked him, the less I liked her" (31). However, Mary's love for Justin does not deter her from being angry with him from time to time: "but all of a

sudden, I was very angry I did not show it but I wanted to strike him. I thought of the sickness in the villages. This Mummy's boy should be sent to Uganda" (71). What informs the sentiments expressed in this revealing statement is the profound resentment that Mary feels when considering the racial, economic and political inequalities that underlie a global social system that is both unfair and corrupt. Mary loves Justin as an individual but she cannot let go of the fact that he is also a spoilt white boy who enjoys several blessings kids his age in Uganda are denied of. Knowing both worlds intimately, Mary is tormented with the knowledge of the great gap between the so-called first and third worlds and the injustices that this gap engenders.

A very interesting point of this is the author's interest in exploring the problem of racism from both perspectives. In the words of Maggie Gee: "In the end, I think that what I call 'the viewpoint of the other' is always of legitimate interest: how a woman imagines a man, how a young person imagines an old person, how a cleaner sees an employer and vice versa. The focus swings back and forth from the other to the self" (2009, 18). The racist attitude always shows condescension, a feeling of superiority. Vanessa looks down on black people and in her turn Mary Tendo criticizes the whites.

Mary despises Vanessa for several reasons, she finds fault with her habits and general attitude towards life. From Mary's point of view, many of Vanessa's shortcomings and flaws can be observed in the white people, in general. "These people are dirtier than (people) in our village. something my mother would not believe" (33). Mary thinks that one of the reasons why white people are dirtier than black people is the fact that there is too much clutter in their homes. They stuff their houses with "things" since they give importance to worthless objects. The rampant consumerism in Western societies leads to uncleanliness and lack of proper hygiene. "More dust than at home because the things were everywhere" says Mary. "All of the houses were stuffed with things; mirrors, pictures, toys, money, left lying around, mostly white people's Money. And the dust was gray, mostly white people's dust. It came from their skins, their hands, their heads" (118). Her proud conclusion is that "The English are too lazy to be cleaners" (119). It is as if white people are trying to fill the emptiness in their lives and in their hearts with material possessions. Mary finds their efforts futile, and their priorities misplaced. She is also aware of the fact that habits are conditioned by one's social and cultural background. "I know everything there is to know about cleaning. Because African people are forced to be clean. In Uganda there are many diseases that kill you if you are not clean" (122). As Mary aptly suggests, habits that communities collectively endorse are influenced by several environmental factors intimately linked with social, historical, and political conditions.

Having lived under dire economic conditions which certainly cannot be divorced from the history of colonisation and imperial plunder, the Ugandans must live and deal with the manifold challenges posed by poverty. For Mary (as well as Vanessa), the values of her home culture constitutes the norm against which she perceives and judges the others. Hence, it comes as no surprise that people of different cultural origins often find one another lacking sense or simply plain wrong, in one sense or another.

Mary is keen on utilizing the power of words in the colonizer's language in order to empower herself. In doing so she articulates a new agency that is very much in tune with the spirit of the times: "I am 'post-colonial' and 'post- imperial', and so I have exactly the right context. Though if anyone else said it, I would be annoyed. I do not want the empire and the colonies attached to me like a long tail of tin cans. I am going to write about my life in England, Uganda and all over the world" (116). Asserting her identity as a post-colonial, Mary reveals her desire to be rid of the legacy of colonialism and all the traumas it caused in the African psyche. She wants to be acknowled and respected as a human being with equal rights and status.

Ultimately, *My Cleaner* is a novel that explores how people might cross the racial and cultural divide. As Gee was writing this story, she understood that she was writing at two hands and one of the central themes was not just Vanessa's misunderstandings, but how Mary and Vanessa misunderstand each other, and also how they slowly work towards something better. Mary gets Vanessa wrong just as much as Vanessa gets Mary wrong. "In short," says Gee

> I was writing about how both characters are dealing with difference, looking across a boundary category that at times blinds them to each other. And very soon indeed the thing I was writing had grown too long to be a short story and was on its way to being a novel. (2009, 15-16)

It is not that Vanessa and Mary don't understand each other's characters, they misjudge each other's cultures. The two women's trip to Vanessa's village helps build a bridge between two characers and allows them to better understand each other's cultures. Mary sees that Vanessa was raised in a very poor community in a house that is considered a "hut" even in Uganda. Impressed by Mary's determination to rise above the circumstances of her birth and upbringing, Vanessa comes to admire Mary's ability and efficiency. Though reluctantly, she shows Mary the letter coming from the publisher which shows his admiration for Mary's essay. The positive note on which the novel ends suggests that if one can overcome one's racial and class prejudices, true and sustainable friendships may be formed crossculturally.

Undoubtedly, *My Cleaner* is a moving novel that tactfully deals with both universal and contemporary themes through the interwined stories of Mary Tendo and Vanessa Henman. Although Gee's thematic scope is admittedly ambitious and her narrative multilayered, the book is accessible and well structured. Most importantly, *My Cleaner* contributes to the ongoing efforts to build bridges between different cultures and races by stressing the importance of sympathy and empathy. Only by cultivating these traits can people overcome perceptual blockages and othering. I would argue that her stance is very much in tune with Gilroy's call for the kind of multicultural ethics and politics that is premised upon "an agonistic, planetary humanism capable of comprehending the universality of our elemental vulnerability to the wrongs we visit upon each other" (4). Looking into and understanding the origins of each other, the two characters finally create a bond between themselves. After visiting Vanessa's village which is poorer than hers, Mary's perception of Vanessa changes significantly. Fischer notes that "[s]ymbolically, this is shown by the fact that the glasses she thought she had left at home somehow appear in her pocket, and she drives back to London seeing more clearly" (202) . It is a symbolic improvement of vision. Fischer adds that "the clearer vison begins when they literally see themselves reflected together in a mirror on the road, reflecting 'two small living things on an enormous planet' who 'merge together into the same bright dot'" (220).

To conclude, neither Vanessa nor Mary openly accepts that they have racial biases but each of them continuously displays this attitude. Mary Tendo observes: "I myself am not prejudiced. I learned this at Makarere, where everyone teaches that racism is bad. And the Bible says we're all God's children" (119). The end of the book suggests a compromise. Both Vanessa and Mary belong to different races and cultures but they have many things in common. Both women love their sons, both want to suceed in life and both want to return to their origins. Mary also finds out that Vanessa herself originally comes from a village maybe poorer than hers. Last but not the least, both women are in search for love and a meaningful life. As Özbatak-Avcı points out:

> Not only does Gee critically explore domestic service in today's London from a global perspective, but she also makes use of the relationship between Mary Tendo, an immigrant servant woman from Uganda, (one of Britain's former colonies) and her white, middle-class English employer, Vanessa Henman, to explore the tensions, contestations and renegotiations within narratives of Englishness (490).

Moreover, "making use of the parallels between the liminal position of the literary servant and that of the migrant, the novel unsettles the hierarchical boundaries between England and its Others both abroad and within" (490). In

dealing with such timely and significant current issues, Gee participates in the heated debates on multiculturalism, inter-cultural interaction, and conflict. All in all, the writer considers that if we can see the common points that connect different racial/cultural groups to one another, it will be much easier to overcome our differences and cultivate mutual understanding.

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