

Black Baby Takes Us Back

Dreaming the Postcolonial Mother

by *Christine St. Peter*

L'auteure commente le "Black Baby" de Claire Boylan et se rappelle son éducation et ses propres expériences face à la ferveur des missionnaires catholiques irlandais.

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Five years ago I offered what I think may have been the first university course in Canada that was based entirely on the study of Irish women's lives and writing. The course was being taught in a university on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, a long way from the centres of Irish settlement in eastern Canada, yet almost all the 30 students in the class claimed Irish descent. I discovered that this descent was a matter of some pride in their families, or at least a talking point, and that most of the students cherished a notion of travelling or studying in the country. Yet I also discovered that, with the exception of one student who actually had emigrated with her family from Ireland, most knew almost nothing of Irish history or culture and some were more than a bit nonplussed at what they found. One, for example, was chagrined to discover the partisan, denominational roots of her childhood days of glory as a baton twirler in the annual Orange Parade in her small Ontario town. Others found themselves experiencing uneasy feelings around the religions none of them actually practised—the daughters of Catholic and Protestant families suddenly not talking about where their families came from for fear of being sucked into tribal animosities that lingered in the family legends. Avoidance of that difficult history was a luxury they could indulge. But other historical differences were impossible to avoid and the moment that most clearly marked the divergence between being Canadian and being Irish came the day I was showing the slides I had made of Nell McCafferty and Pat Murphy's picture book of Irish women, *Women in Focus: Contemporary Irish Women's Lives*. My students watched the images quietly, until after about 30 pictures when one woman suddenly called out somewhat in surprise: "But they're all white!" Thus began an elementary lesson in the difference between living in a nation whose past was characterized not by immigration, as in "multicultural" Canada, but by

political and economic emigration which resulted in this apparent racial homogeneity.

I tell this story in part because it gives some idea about the challenges of trying to understand a foreign culture and literature from a distance that is both intimate and infinitely distant, which is my position as well as my students'. But I also tell the story because it explains why I avoided reading Clare Boylan's *Black Baby* for several years. I felt uneasy about this novel that dared do something very problematic within the North American feminist context: that is, to appropriate the voice and experience of a racialized minority woman and, moreover, to emblazon what could be considered a racist phrase as title of the work. I am not suggesting that Canada is a racism-free zone—anything but as a recent discovery in my neighbourhood deli reminds me. So deep and taken-for-granted is the semiotics of racism that candies called "nigger babies" 40 years ago are still for sale in the stores of Canada, and no attempt to rename them "black babies" or "licorice babies" can hide the atavistic history they still carry. It is shocking that these candies should still be sold in Canada with its complacent national fiction of multicultural harmony. But when I did finally read Clare Boylan's book, I had another shock: her novel jolted me into remembering a long forgotten, 40-year old experience of my childhood in an Irish Catholic school in the United States where I was born and lived until I left for Canada at age 18. There, in St. Joseph's Parish, the fearsome, tyrannical, dare I say, maniacal, Monsignor Henry Riordan terrorized our young lives with talk of hell and damnation, usually around matters of sex (although he was also keen on ferreting out the neglect of one's morning prayers.) In the parish elementary school where I was educated in the 1950s all manner of tribal training was underway, including the conversion of the heathen. Only later did I learn to call this the practice of Catholic imperialism, or more precisely Irish Catholic imperialism, a heritage I too could embrace as a righteous descendant of Irish famine refugees. When I finally got around to reading *Black Baby* I found that it is this experience that Clare Boylan so wittily—and devastatingly recalls. She imagines what might happen if those black babies we so eagerly bought as children actually showed up as adults claiming us as their parents.

Readers raised in more salubrious times may not know what I am talking about. Even my younger sister, ten years my junior and educated in the same parochial school, didn't understand the emotional effect of what we called "pagan babies" (the American term used in "othering" the Africans). This involved a Lenten practice of self-sacrifice in which we were to bring our pennies and nickels to

donate to a fund which would be sent to a foreign missionary busily recruiting for God by converting the infidels to Catholicism, which we were taught was the only true faith, the only way to be saved. For \$5 we could buy our own baby and give it a name. I never had that much money but I longed to buy a baby of my own—consumer

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lust rampant. Lacking the big bucks—this was the '50s, after all—I had to join a corporate venture with my classmates, creating a fractious co-parenting arrangement with endless quarrels over the name of our child. I hasten to add here that the nuns who presided over this practice would never have claimed that we were actually buying a baby. But I was eight years old and suggestible, as were my classmates, and for sure we thought of it this way. This was an act of acquisition, a form of hostile makeover.

Such is the scenario Clare Boylan, unfettered by North American racial reticence, allows herself to exploit.

“I bought you for two and sixpence,” [explains the elderly Alice when she first meets Dinah, the black baby of the title, now adult and in Dublin]. “We all bought a black baby. You had to.... It was a common practice everywhere.” Now, more than fifty years later, Alice began to wonder if this was so. The Irish had always had an intense sentimental preoccupation with distant pagans.... “Penny for the black baby” was one of the earliest phrases learnt. There was as much pleasure in putting a penny in the mission box with its nodding black head on top, as in spending it on an orange or a dozen Honey Bees. The privilege of buying a black baby was reserved for older children who had partaken of the fleshly feast of First Communion. Decked out as miniatures brides and at the peak of financial solvency due to the bounty of relatives who filled their little white handbags, they queued to purchase a savage soul. All the children bought a black baby. Few could resist this early placation of maternity. In any case, as Alice said, there wasn't a choice. (49–50)

In playing out this conceit, the author constructs a

complex satire of the way Irish Catholics, themselves victims of historical abuse, could become in turn righteous colonizers and wily spiritual bankers, storing up credit in heaven. The book's tool is humour but, as I discovered when I asked my non-Irish Canadian feminist reading group to share the novel, it is possible that the humour only works if you've had some version of Monsignor Riordan in your psychic makeup. How else to explain that they did not find hilarious this exchange between Dinah and Figgis, the feckless husband of another woman: “When they finally got into [Dinah's] small bed, [Figgis] explained that he could not get his equipment to operate.”

“Maybe it's as well,” he said. “It's a grave mortal sin for a married man.”

“We can just be friends,” [Dinah] said, “I don't mind.”

“I've always wanted to sleep with a black woman,” [Figgis] observed. “It's been a dream of mine. We might have a go some other time for I've an abstinence now to my credit.” (47)

Figgis becomes Dinah's friend when she arrives from Brixton seeking greener fields. Her arrival in Dublin is auspicious, her vision rose-coloured. Dinah

could not believe her luck in having landed in such a place. It was full of churches and children and charming men who liked to laugh and drink.... Such nice, child-like men. Apart from the priests, they were all married. They loved their wives. Their eyes filled with tears when they mentioned them. “Poor girl, she's had a terrible time with me,” her red-headed friend, Figgis, told her sadly, before beating his hairy paws on the counter for drink and bursting into song once more. (46)

This Dinah, our Dublin guide, in fact exists only as a creation in the mind of Alice, an elderly Dublin spinster. Dinah is really Cora, who, in desperate financial straits, goes to Alice's house to scam her out of some money by posing as a missionary collecting for the African work of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. Cora's opening line: “I am your daughter in Christ” (16) is interpreted by Alice as the arrival of the black baby she had bought and named Dinah 50 years earlier. Tempted by Alice's invitation to move in and be adopted, Cora-Dinah would have succumbed were it not for Alice's sterile inability to “extend the cramped imagination to glorious mystery” (57) a task the novel then undertakes. Famished for beauty, love, and vitality, Alice constructs her Dinah into an exotic bringer

of life: "Make me well," she begs Dinah (55) in one breath, but then reverts to cultural indoctrination with "You people never really believe in God, do you" (57), a statement that reinforces Cora's growing sense that to the Irish, "people were white" (24). But Alice still longs for a daughter and begs Dinah for stories of Africa and the early life of "our little heroine" (56). This wasn't the scam Cora expected to play, but she manages to create a tale of African beauty and possibility out of the scraps of stories told by her poor, abused, and abusive mother who bore and bred Cora in a Brixton slum dwelling. Both Alice and Dinah are in search of mothers, both "cut off from the source of maternal affection." As Dinah later complains to Figgis, "I seem to have had two mothers and now I have none" (65).

Alice's failure to accept Dinah leaves both of them the poorer, and the novel closes with Dinah stalking another prospective mother in Stephen's Green after this woman, too, mistakes Dinah for her daughter. But between Alice's refusal and Dinah's departure, Boylan sketches the joys life might hold for a more generous humanity: joy, laughter, human warmth, comfort, friendship, good sex, community—even maternal love. Unfortunately this dream of felicity happens only in Alice's mind as she lies dying of a stroke during one magic month in which Dublin and its inhabitants are transformed in her dream. As is characteristic of Clare Boylan's work, humour is the tool that reveals the pathos, in this case the un-lived reality that should and could have been attained.

In a recently published article discussing *Black Baby*, a scholar named Jean-Louis Giovannangeli declares: "What Dinah brings to Alice is the phallus she is missing and which satisfies her completely ..." (180). How he could offer such a reading given the evidence is baffling, but then so, too, is his assumption that Cora had an African childhood (174) and that Clare Boylan's novel owes most of its narrative devices to James Joyce, including massive allusions to *Dubliners*, *Finnegans Wake*, and *Ulysses*. Indeed Boylan's fictional novel would appear to be built on the "Ulyssean cosmography of Dublin" (172), as well as to the "Joycean idea of retrospective arrangements" (175). Giovannangeli finds everywhere the "Joycean lineage" (177). Even Clare Boylan's use of humour is the "Joycean use of laughter, a kind of Swifitean tragicomic wit" (178), and her use of silence he sees as based on Joyce's way of expressing "the idea of the missing language" (181).

While I certainly do not wish to deny Clare Boylan what may well be a profound and thorough knowledge of all of Joyce's writings, I find it interesting and disturbing that to so many foreign critics, an Irish writer's fiction must be refracted through the lens of James Joyce as though only here can the writer achieve the legitimacy that lifts her into the realm of the worthy and, for the critic, into the profitable in terms of academic capital.

Which takes me back to the beginning. *Black Baby* answers my student's complaint that all the women were white with a dream of the might-have-beens. Alice, in her dreaming bliss, recalls the only passion of her life, an

African doctor she dared not risk marrying because, as she believes, if the dream is to be believed, "I couldn't have brought a black man home to mother" (164). Like her mother before her, Alice "renounced life" (183) even though her head had always been "stewing with dreams" (198). "She tried [unsuccessfully] to picture herself as a young Mrs. Makwaia, wheeling a pram, braving the stares" (165). With her renunciation of Dr. Makwaia at age 25, Alice's "whole body went into rebellion and the blood that she feared so much when she was fourteen dried up and never came again" (165). Thus disappeared her possibility of biological motherhood. The black baby that might have issued from the match serves as the symbol of lost hope and failed reconciliation. Giovannangeli writes that "the story leaves everything unturned, as it was before it started" (175). I would say rather that the novel writes the dream of a glorious vision of life's possibilities beyond the sundry practices of colonization. "How remarkable, how nice, the unexplored company of the world" (muses Alice). "How little there was to fear, once you stopped being afraid. 'We are not alone'" (74).

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