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“Thank God I Am an African Woman”: The Christian as Exile in Maggie Gee’s *My Cleaner*

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RESUMEN:

El último informe del Centro de Investigación Pew sobre la afiliación religiosa de inmigrantes internacionales, “Faith on the Move” (2012), concluye que el 49% de los inmigrantes del mundo son cristianos (105.670.000) y, cuando se aplica a los asentados en la Unión Europea, el porcentaje crece al 56% (26.370.000). Sin embargo, el hecho de que el cristianismo sea la fe profesada por la mayoría de la población inmigrante en todo el mundo no implica necesariamente que este factor facilite su cálida recepción en un país anfitrión de tradición cristiana, tal como puede ser el Reino Unido. Por el contrario, el inmigrante puede descubrir que uno de los principales constituyentes de su identidad, su fe, puede experimentar una adicional “desterritorialización” (Papastergiadis, 2000) en la nueva nación de acogida. La escritora inglesa Maggie Gee ha escrito tres novelas que pueden considerarse ejemplos sobresalientes de literatura sobre inmigración: *The White Family* (2002), *My Cleaner* (2005) y *My Driver* (2009). Estas obras exploran diferentes dimensiones de los choques culturales y sociales entre un conjunto de personajes “tradicionalmente ingleses” y sus antagonistas, inmigrantes africanos o caribeños. Mientras que el conflicto es abiertamente racista en el caso de *The White Family*, se vuelve más sutil y tal vez más insidioso en *My Cleaner*, donde la modalidad de racismo es “condescendiente, ‘bien intencionada’, de clase media” (O’Kelly, 2005). Varios de los protagonistas de estas narrativas son cristianos en mayor o menor medida, aunque sus respectivos patrones religiosos muestran diferencias sobresalientes que no son de gran ayuda a la hora de cerrar la brecha entre viejos y nuevos ciudadanos británicos. Este artículo se centra en la protagonista de *My Cleaner*, la migrante ugandesa Mary Tendo, y en cómo sufre un proceso de desarraigo en el país de acogida que afecta su identidad religiosa. Como explica Carin Mardorossian, un tema propio de la literatura migratoria explora el proceso del desarraigo conforme “la identidad del migrante va sufriendo cambios radicales que alteran su autopercepción y a menudo ocasionan ambivalencia respecto a su vida antigua y nueva” (2002: 16). Observaremos cómo la piedad natural de Mary corre el peligro de enfriarse en contacto con un entorno secularizado o indiferente, y cómo las dificultades para reestablecer su autoconcepción como cristiana en el nuevo hogar la llevan a una fase de “desterritorialización” religiosa, adaptando el término acuñado por Papastergiadis (2000).

Palabras clave: Maggie Gee, *My Cleaner*, ficción migratoria, cristianismo, literatura, inmigración

ABSTRACT:

The latest Pew Research Center report on the religious affiliation of international migrants, “Faith on the Move” (2012), concludes that 49% of the migrants of the world are Christian (105,670,000), and, when applied to those settled in the European Union, the percentage grows to 56 % (26,370,000). The fact that Christianity is the faith professed by the majority of the migrant population worldwide, however, does not necessarily imply that this factor may facilitate a welcoming reception in a host country with a Christian tradition, like the U.K. On the contrary, the migrant may find that one of the major constituents of his identity, his faith, is likely to amount to a further deterritorialization (Papastergiadis, 2000) in his new home nation. The English writer Maggie Gee has written three novels that can be regarded as outstanding examples of migrant literature: *The White Family* (2002), *My Cleaner* (2005), and *My Driver* (2009). These works explore different dimensions of the cultural and social clashes between a set of “traditionally English” characters and their antagonists, African or Caribbean immigrants. Whereas the conflict is overtly racist in the case of *The White Family*, it gets subtler and perhaps more insidious in the case of *My Cleaner*, where racism is of the “patronising, ‘well-meaning’, middle-class variety” (O’Kelly, 2005). As it turns out, most of the protagonists in these narratives are Christian to some degree, though their respective religious patterns show outstanding differences that do not help much in bridging the gap between the old and the new British citizens. This article will focus on the central character in *My Cleaner*, the Ugandan migrant Mary Tendo, and how she undergoes a process of displacement in the receiving-country that challenges her religious identity. As Carin Mardorossian explains, one common theme of migrant literature is how “the migrant’s identity undergoes radical shifts that alter her self-perception and often result in ambivalence towards both her old and new existence” (Mardorossian, 2002:16). I will explore how Mary’s inbred piety is in danger of cooling off in contact with a secularist or indifferent ambience, and how her difficulties to restate her self-perception as a Christian in a new home make her go through a phase of religious “deterritorialization”, adapting the term coined by Papastergiadis (2000).

Keywords: Maggie Gee, *My Cleaner*, migrant fiction, Christianity, literature, immigration

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent sociological research on the relationship between transnational migration and religion provides an empirical window to observe the ways in which religious globalisation operates. According to Levitt, "the institutional connections that migration engenders, and that reinforce and are reinforced by already-global aspects of religious life, transform religion into a powerful, under-explored site of transnational belonging" (Levitt, 2004: 14). The Pew Research Center report on the religious affiliation of international migrants, "Faith on the Move" (2012), concluded that 49% of the migrants of the world were Christian (105,670,000), and, when applied to those living in the European Union, the percentage grew to 56 % (26,370,000). The fact that Christianity is still the faith professed by the majority of the migrant population worldwide could be expected to facilitate a welcoming reception in a host country with a Christian tradition, like the U.K. But this is not always the case; indeed, the migrant may find that his/her religious faith, one of the major constituents of identity, is likely to amount to further displacement in the new home nation.

The English writer Maggie Gee has written three novels –*The White Family* (2002), *My Cleaner* (2005), and *My Driver* (2009)– which can be regarded as remarkable examples of migrant literature, understanding as such those narratives whose "subject matter will be about migration and the culture and tradition of the host nation" (Pourjafari and Vahidpour, 2014: 680). Gee's works explore different dimensions of the cultural and social clashes among "traditionally English" characters and immigrants of African or Caribbean origin. Whereas the conflict is overtly racist in the case of *The White Family*, it becomes subtler and perhaps more insidious in the case of *My Cleaner*, where racism is of the "patronising, 'well-meaning', middle-class variety" (O'Kelly, 2005: n.pag.). It is remarkable that most of the protagonists in these narratives are Christian to some degree, though their respective religious approaches show outstanding differences that do not help much in bridging the gap between the old and the new citizens of Britain.

This article will focus on the central character in *My Cleaner*, the Ugandan migrant Mary Tendo, and how she undergoes a process of displacement in the receiving-country that challenges her religious identity. As

Carin Mardorossian explains, one common theme of migrant literature is how "the migrant's identity undergoes radical shifts that alter her self-perception and often result in ambivalence towards both her old and new existence" (Mardorossian, 2002: 16). I will explore how Mary's inbred piety is in danger of cooling off in contact with a secularist or indifferent ambience, and how her difficulties to restate her self-perception as a Christian in a new home make her go through a phase of religious "deterritorialization", adapting the term coined by Papastergiadis (2000).

2. A CLASH OF PERSON/NATIONALITIES

Maggie Gee's *My Cleaner* follows up *The White Family* in its treatment of the social and demographic changes brought about by the flow of immigration into Britain in the second half of the 20th century, and explores how the new arrivals challenge traditionally insular patterns. Racism and family life (O'Kelly, 2005: n.pag.) or perhaps "everyday racism" –a concept introduced by Philomena Essed (1985)– are themes revisited in a context of domestic realism.

Vanessa Henman is a London-based, middle-aged writer, self-absorbed and neurotic, whose 22-year-old son Justin is going through a severe depression that keeps him inside his bedroom. The only person he would talk to is his former nanny, the Ugandan Mary Tendo, who once worked for them as a cleaner for a miserable salary. Mary responds to Vanessa's call for help and temporarily leaves her fairly stable life in Uganda, but this time she is not the meek, underpaid servant of a decade back. Determined to make a man of the soft Justin she takes control of the situation, makes the decisions in the kitchen and puts Vanessa in her place by refusing to take on any extra work, least of all the cleaning –hence the irony of the title, as her employer expects her to continue being a sort of multi-purpose domestic. Predictably, much of the novel's comedy and drama derives from the clash between attitudes and mindsets of the two heroines, which in turn are allegedly designed to represent their respective backgrounds. The Englishwoman is portrayed as well-to-do, politically correct, mentally unstable, selfish, cultured and patronizing. The Ugandan migrant is strong, generous and primitive, and in her second long stay in England she is determined not to mince matters and to speak her mind, much to the irritation of her host, who avoids calling herself employer but ultimately sees herself as such.

The multi-layered narrative keeps suggesting that, no matter how different they may look, both women nevertheless share important features: both are divorced, mothers of single sons, natives of small villages, self-made professionals and, surprisingly, talented writers. But even in what they share their attitudes are sharply contrasting. While Vanessa dropped Trevor, her good-natured ex-husband, because she felt he was her inferior, she still uses him for domestic chores and general protection and tries to stop him from rebuilding his life. In turn, Mary was abandoned by her Muslim husband, whom she still regards with affection, because she was Christian. Vanessa did not have time to spend with Justin when he was little, but in his twenties he still lives at her home under her shadow, while Mary's son Jamil, taken away from her when her husband moved to Tripoli, has left home to join a military group in the Middle East. While Mary loves her native village and plans to carry out humanitarian aid work there in the future, Vanessa tries to hide her rural origins and has kept out of touch from her remaining family for decades. Furthermore, Vanessa has made a name as a writer by complying with the rules of the market and writing vacuous self-help books, but she is aware that her real talent for narrative has been thwarted in the process. Mary, in turn, writes from the heart, and her memoirs, devoid of rhetoric, are highly valued by an influential literary agent who sees her promising potential.

All these oppositions show a clash of personalities, which also becomes one of civilizations that should be coexisting in harmony in present-day Britain. In this respect Maggie Gee's work has been regarded as an updated "Condition-of-England-novel" (Kiliç, 2013: 5) reflecting the new multicultural realities of contemporary society and the changing scenario brought about by immigration. As such, the novel provides an observation field for recent sociological debates and illustrates Sandra Ponzanesi's notion of transnational encounters as sites "of transition and transformation between received and appropriated categories" (Ponzanesi, 2004: 219). Gee explores the displacement of the outsider through the eyes of a perceptive Ugandan woman, whose personal story parallels those of millions of other migrants. Mary first came to London in her early twenties with the intention of taking a master's degree, but the promised grant from her government never came and so she ended up working as a full-time cleaner in offices and homes.

She fell in love, married a Lybian and they had a son, but her husband remained a student while she worked for a living. After a decade of so much sacrifice in London she was abandoned, and eventually returned crestfallen to Uganda to start a new life from scratch. But now, in her second stay in England, she is more experienced and mature, and is determined not to become a victim of exploitation any longer. Hers is now what Vijay Mishra would term a "new diaspora", a "tendency to see one's exile as negotiable, semi-permanent or even merely temporary" (qtd in Fludernik, 2003: xiii). She will not make the same mistakes of her youth and, since saving money becomes a priority, she demands a fair income and refuses to take on extra work. Kiliç even affirms that "she focuses a bit too much on the money she will earn" (Kiliç, 2014: 115), which illustrates Papastergiadis' contention that "the identity of the migrant [is] tied to [the] economic calculation of opportunity over exploitation" (Papastergiadis, 2000: 57).

Mary cannot help perceiving the difference between her present position and the predicament of other immigrants arrived in England to look for a better future, mostly a group of Ugandan friends she hangs out with, described as follows:

They complain, they talk loudly, they roar with laughter. They tell stories about *kyeyo* in London: one's a lawyer in Kampala, but a bouncer here; the teacher washes dishes; the senior civil servant is selling kitchens on the telephone. Most of them hold down at least two jobs, and some of them are studying as well. All of them have fallen asleep on buses, as Mary once did, years ago. All of them find London ferociously expensive, and yet they send money home, and save, and manage to go out as well. (Gee, 2005: 127)

Mary's friends constitute what Cohen would call a *diasporic community* (Cohen, 1997: 175), a prominent feature of a global society that is expected to build new levels of communication and identity. She often feels the need to be with them as a way to overcome loneliness and displacement. Significantly, Mary no longer falls asleep on buses as her compatriots still do. Her job is not as exhausting as it was then because experience can make her claim her rights and get closer to the status of the nationals.

But even if the two heroines conceive the social division in terms of “we” versus “them”, Gee paints a social environment in which hybridity is more and more the rule, and one evidence is the fact that characters with foreign names crop up in the lives of the protagonists. Thus, Mary married a Lybian, Vanessa’s ex-husband moved in with Soraya, a young Iranian –whom she callously refers to as “some kind of Indian who doesn’t speak English (Gee, 2005: 27)–; the Austrian Anya is hired to do the cleaning; and Justin finally reunites with his beloved Zakira, a Muslim Moroccan, who eventually gives birth to a beautiful mixed-race son named Abdul Trevor. There is a symbolic dimension to this birth at the end of the novel. When theorists such as Stuart Hall (1994) and Homi Bhabha (1994) defined identity as hybrid, in direct challenge to prior pseudo-scientific claims that hybrids were sterile or weak, their contention was rather that hybridity becomes a positive gain. In the novel Vanessa, the “everyday racist” (Essed), will have a hybrid grandson she will adore, and this fact provides a note of hope.

3. RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

One further source of contrast between the average Briton and the African migrant as depicted in *My Cleaner* is their understanding of religion, or rather their different approaches to the same Christian denomination, Anglicanism.¹ Mary is a Ugandan Christian (Gee, 2005: 96) –a member of the Church of Uganda belonging to the Anglican Communion– and seems a very devout one. From her first appearance in the novel she is seen thanking God/Jesus² for whatever is good in her life –for her birthday (13), for being African (49), for being back in London (55)– and also prays for help, for Justin’s healing (55), for her son’s safe return (199), even for finding a literary agent that may promote her life-writing (205). Her prayer does not sound repetitive or lifeless, and her familiarity with God also entails arguing with him, particularly when she is worried about the fate of her son Jamil (21-2). At the start of the story she wonders what God’s will for her might be, whether to stay in Uganda or leave for England (37), and similarly strives to accept his providence when the chips are down (199). Mary Tendo was brought up a Christian by her parents in her native village, and the easiness of her belief shows traces of the simplicity of poverty. Privation and piety are symbolically linked in her meagre choice of readings when

she was a child. Indeed, she recalls that there were only five books at her parents’ home: three cheap novels found by her father in the hotel he worked at, the Bible –which she had read nearly every day–, and an incomplete hymn book she was remarkably proud of (20).

Mary’s Christian faith seems alive and solid, not just a sentimental outlet, and helps her to cope with her daily anxieties. And yet the emotive component of her religious fervour is in danger of cooling off while in London. Adapting Papastergiadis’s notion of “deterritorialization” to the religious dimension, Mary seems to go through the alienating awareness that her Christianity “can no longer be conceived of as reflecting a coherent and distinct identity” (Papastergiadis, 2000: 208). On this second stay she finds that Church ritual has relaxed in the “American style”, and though it has become “more friendly” she does not feel at home in the local Anglican parish, where the vicar likes to be called Andy and “most of the black people are very old” (Gee, 2005: 66). Later she sets out to “find a church where Ugandans go” and eventually finds one on the other side of town, in Waterloo, a place “to sing her heart out on Sunday morning with the Ugandan Anglicans who know you open your mouth when you sing. Who laugh and chatter after the service, and do not whisper, or pretend to be humble” (Gee, 2005: 126).

But later in the novel, at her darkest hour, Mary feels too tired and sad to go east to Waterloo, so she attends the local church again and sits “with the other black people, Nigerians, Somalis, Ethiopians, Jamaicans” of whom she complains that “they only say ‘Hallo’ and ‘It’s cold’ and ‘How are you?’ because they do not really know you”. She has failed to integrate into a Christian *diasporic community* and neither is she able to feel at home in the (arguably) Eurocentric community of the neighbouring church. Despite the vicar’s efforts to appear friendly Mary perceives a disquieting aloofness: “last week I stayed to have coffee with the vicar, Mr Andy, who asked all the newcomers to stay, but he was too busy to talk to me, so I had a stale biscuit and went away” (198). Through her eyes we learn that black people sit on the back benches while the whites do so on the front; that the whites, unlike the Africans and Jamaicans, do not like to look smart in church but prefer to wear “jeans and sandals ... to look more humble” (209-10). Furthermore, Reverend Andy’s sermon is rather childish, making

jokes taken from TV programs that Mary does not understand, while Justin and other "scruffy white people" (213) do.

Mary Tendo's sense of *deteritorialization* is further amplified after a significant event in the novel. Mary relates an encounter with a drunkard on the bus home, when she, who has just purchased a brand-new mobile phone, is repeatedly playing two ringing tones, "Amazing grace" and "Ave Maria", trying to decide between them. Her fellow passenger tells her to stop – "One thing I don't need is 'Amazing Grace'", he coarsely says (Gee, 2005: 87)– and she complies, but soon afterwards she finds a new tune, "When the saints", and in her enthusiasm plays it over forgetting her neighbour's complaints. Then he snatches the phone from her and states that "[t]his is a British bus and you can't do that" (88). This annoying episode might be suggesting that Mary is not allowed to publicly display the smallest religious feeling on "a British bus", which, considering the importance she gives to music in liturgy, may freeze the lowering temperature of her natural piety. Further underlying layers of meaning can be found in this scene, as the first tune that bothers the drunkard, "Amazing Grace", is a traditional church song historically associated with the abolition of slavery in Britain.³

The novel's structure, reinforced by the alternate narrators, is built around the clash of the two heroines' worldviews. One of such contrasts is Mary's religiousness against Vanessa's lack of it; the latter does not feel "formally religious" but admits, rather pompously, that she has "a sense of spiritual beauty" (Gee, 2005: 205). There is obvious irony in her self-definition but, as usual, the interpretation of irony remains elusive. Gee is thus representing the overall indifference to Christianity, or to formal religion in general, among contemporary educated Londoners.⁴ Vanessa does not entirely reject religion, in fact she accepts Mary's invitation to attend church on the Sunday of the Harvest Festival, but her reasons are more convivial than religious, as this becomes a good opportunity to strengthen the bonds with her son's helper. Indeed, the event turns out to be a pleasant family outing, for which Mary, Vanessa, Justin and even Trevor dress up. Furthermore, while in church Vanessa gets a "shock of love" when she hears the second hymn, "We plough fields and scatter", which brings her back to her origins, to her parents and her childhood piety:

... and though she is wary of sentiment, she finds there are tears pricking in her eyes. She is part of the singing, and part of the people everywhere who have ploughed the fields and loved the earth, who have scattered the good seed on the land, who are watered by the Almighty hand; and somewhere in that surge of feeling is an almost forgotten love for her father. (Gee, 2005: 212)

Paradoxically, the church ritual that seems so cold to Mary turns out enormously evocative to Vanessa. Again, it is through music that religious feeling is stirred, and significantly she needs a much lower "dose" of it to get emotional. But Mary cannot dispel the thought that "English churches can be very cold" (Gee, 2005: 212).

The importance given to music contrasts with the absence of theology or doctrine in the religious conceptions shown in the novel. Mary, a simple-minded Ugandan, embraces Christianity existentially, and her faith provides a worldview that helps her to place everyday events in perspective and often brings consolation when needed. In turn, Vanessa's approach to faith is mostly sentimental and transient, perhaps a passing return to the forgotten essence of childhood and innocence, a temporary break from habitual self-absorption, or a desperate search for personal relationships. However, the power of faith to provide stronger links with one's fellow-creatures should not be underestimated, as it remains a corollary of the notion of universal kinship stemming from the very essence of Christian belief. Thus, Mary cannot understand how *civilised* people in England can be racist, and ponders that "the Bible says we are all God's children" (Gee, 2005: 121).

This duality between the supernatural and the natural somehow connects with the notion of enculturation, which encourages the gradual conversion of pagan rites into Christian feasts. In the novel Vanessa's epiphany occurs during the Harvest Festival.⁵ Significantly, at the start of the novel we are informed that Mary was born on an unspecified day during the harvest season in Uganda (Gee, 2005: 13). 200-odd pages later, this ancient festival of rebirth is the occasion providing a turning point in the difficult but developing process of mutual understanding between Vanessa and Mary. At Harvest festivals in England parishioners usually bring in food items or, mostly in the countryside, products from their gardens or farms. Later the provisions

are distributed among the poor and senior citizens of the local community, or used to raise funds for the church or for charity. But Mary observes that the white parishioners are not only “scruffy” but also ungenerous, as she sees a poor display of ill-assorted food items in front of the altar, some of them with a supermarket label still on. She reflects sadly upon this “unsatisfactory landscape” concluding that in UK “they have forgotten how to grow things”, and predicting that “[o]ne day they will starve, like Ethiopians” (213).

Even if Mary’s judgment sounds excessively harsh –she is overlooking the fact that Anglicans living in towns or cities would usually bring non-perishables to be donated to food banks or homeless shelters–, her presentation of Britain as a decaying country and her denunciation of its ailing society echo the tone of some of Maggie Gee’s early novels (Kiliç, 2013b: 109). A further critique is carried out in *My Cleaner*, always in the chiaroscuro tone of comedy and filtered through Mary’s consciousness. Thus, when she sadly reflects on Britain’s barrenness while at the Harvest service, she holds on to the hope that “it will be different in the country” (Gee, 2005: 213), thinking of her oncoming visit to Vanessa’s village, a climax in the process of the two heroines’ convergence. But this trip to the countryside proves disappointing and confirms Mary’s assessment of England as a cold and spiritually barren nation. Mary was planning to attend the Sunday service in the village, but she finds out that “the beautiful church, with its fine tiled spire topped with a golden chicken spinning in the wind... has been turned into flats... [O]nly half of them have sold No one round here can afford them” (242). Thus, Gee calls attention to one feature of the English architectural landscape, the secularisation of churches, sold and converted into civil buildings. There is no narrative comment accompanying this fragment, but it is set against an elegiac background as Mary evokes memories of her native village and compares its exuberance and life with the desolation and barrenness of the English countryside. Similarly –it may seem– the spiritual sterility of the English has led them to abandon their Christian worship and convert their churches into half-empty blocks of flats, theatres, public buildings, or even restaurants, coffee-shops and places of entertainment.

If Mary’s religious sentiment is lively and warm, it is not deprived of contradictions. Thus, Mary does not comply with the

traditional regard for purity that lies behind the Christian ethos. As a student in Makerere she had sex with her professors in exchange for help with her studies and money (Gee, 2005: 163-168); and though she is indignant at Vanessa’s suspicion that she may be sleeping with Justin,⁶ she does have regular extra-marital love-making with her new boyfriend Charles, whom she calls her *kabito*. Similarly, Mary fails at feeling compassion for Vanessa when she is attacked by a student, and instead of worrying about the victim she is mostly concerned about whether her own savings may have been stolen too. Another contradictory element is Mary’s belief in magic and superstition. Though she does not admit this openly, she cannot escape the thought that one source of Justin’s illness is his being haunted by evil spirits, and she tries to get rid of a set of ethnic masks Vanessa had purchased in Uganda, blaming them for their maleficent influence.⁷ It is never obvious whether such contradictions are meant to represent some sort of hybrid African Christianity –or its cliché– or rather point to the fact that Mary is a round, individualised character, and as such subject to incongruity.

4. A POSITIVE GAIN

In the words of Levitt, “transnational religious life provides an alternative script for belonging and social change, through personal transformation and by example, or because believers see themselves as living within and responsible for improving the religiously-defined world where they situate themselves” (Levitt, 2004: 15). Indeed, Mary Tendo, though characterised as an individual with her lights and shadows, stands for a number of values coming from abroad –warmth, generosity, kindness, openness...– that could regenerate old England and stimulate a new space for understanding and dialogue. In *My Cleaner* the migrant character is no longer an underpaid worker coming from the former colonies in search of survival, ready to undertake the jobs the locals refuse; instead she has the power not only to assert her own values but also to revitalise –emblematically, at least– a barren and aged society. Consequently, Mary’s inborn Christian piety is one factor that helps to warm up the prevailing religious coldness, and perhaps remind the old Europeans of the value of treating others as fellow-creatures and children of the same God.

In Mary Tendo’s characterisation there are some elements of what the narratologist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan terms “reinforcement by analogy”.⁸ One of such is related

to the allegorical significance of proper names, as is the case of the set of textual signs suggesting her presentation as “a Marian figure” or “a spiritual mother figure”. Susan A. Fischer enumerates a few of these dimensions such as her religious piety, her saving mission, or her “compassion and love for Justin”, and interprets some textual passages as images sustaining that allegorical association, such as “the image of Mary cradling the waning young man [that] suggests a *pieta*” (Fischer, 2015: 221-22). Moving further along these lines, Mary Tendo could be said to stand for fruitfulness in a barren world; she accepts a call for help to redeem fallen humanity (represented by Justin) and leaves her home to attend on another pregnant woman (Zakira, her equivalent to cousin Elizabeth). In the final section of the novel she utters a thanksgiving prayer that any reader versed in the Gospel of Luke must find familiar: “For God has smiled on his servant, Mary. I have been blessed, I am full to the brim” (Gee, 2005: 316).⁹ Significantly, she learns of her own pregnancy at Christmas, and this discovery dispels the darkness of her most anxious days in London. Indeed, her pregnancy is a source of joy that helps her overcome the despondency that was gnawing her since she came to Britain and her acute *deterritorialization* of belief. She understands that her sickness was an effect of her pregnancy and no longer blames the air of London or Vanessa for it. Instead, she adds exultingly: “One [child] is a miracle. It is a world of change: from nothing to something. It is the future, leading us out of the past” (317).

Thus, *My Cleaner* ends with a clear note of optimism: a child is bringing light to Mary’s world, and thanks to her agency Justin and Zakira’s son, Abdul Trevor, is also bringing light into Vanessa’s family and will surely help to heal their unacknowledged “everyday racism”. Coherent with Homi Bhabha’s (1994) and Stuart Hall’s (1994) reinterpretation of hybridity as a positive gain, as the embodiment of a new synthesis, this new-born child of black and white parents, Muslim and Christian, symbolises a promising future. In the words of Papastergiadis, “the figure of the hybrid is extended to serve as a ‘bridging person’, one that is both the benefactor of a cultural surplus, and the embodiment of a new synthesis” (15). Thus, the happy ending of this comedy transcends the individual fates of its characters and is meant to prefigure the immediate future of a multicultural Britain, whose citizens will hopefully stimulate mutual understanding and will learn to live with diversity.¹⁰

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NOTES

¹ In doing so Gee is presenting credible characters whose options represent those of a majority of their kind. The 2002 religious census in Uganda (the novel was first published in 2005) stated that 85.2 % of the population was Christian, 41.9 % Catholic, and 43.3 % Protestant (mostly Anglican, 35.9%) (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2002: n.pag)

² A common element of all the Christian denominations is their belief in Jesus not just as a historical figure but as the Son of God, and therefore God himself.

³ The hymn was composed around 1770 by John Newman, who had been a former slave trader, in repentance for his past life.

⁴ The 2011 religious census in England and Wales revealed that only 48% of the Londoners declared themselves Christian (Office for National Statistics. 2011: n.pag).

⁵ A traditional Christian festivity derived from previous pagan celebrations held over the Anglo-Saxon world on the Sunday near the Harvest Moon by the end of September.

⁶ In fact, she does sleep with Justin during his convalescence, though this does not mean sex.

⁷ Mary says, "Of course, I do not believe in demons, and yet [Vanessa] has invited them into her home, with the many hideous masks and figures that she brought back from her trip to Uganda [...] I have said to her several times already that these masks are not good to have in the house" (Gee, 2005: 185).

⁸ Analogy is treated by Rimmon-Kenan as a reinforcement of characterisation rather than as a separate type of character

indicator provided by the text. Its expressive capacity depends on the prior establishment of the character's traits by other, more significant, means. The major types she discusses are analogous names, landscapes, and analogy with other characters (Rimmon-Kenan, 1999: 68-72).

⁹ In the Gospel of Luke, Mary voices a thanksgiving hymn known as Magnificat: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;/ my spirit rejoices in God my savior. / For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness;/ behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed" (Lk, 1: 46-48).

¹⁰ I wish to thank Martyn Sampson for his attentive reading of this article and his insightful comments.

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