

Football and Racism in Roy Williams' *Sing Yer Heart out for the Lads*

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ABSTRACT

Roy Williams is one of the outstanding contemporary black British playwrights. His plays deal with issues of race, racism, nationalism, masculinity, working-class identities, sport, and intergenerational relationships. Through his plays, Williams tries to provoke his audience to a very essential issue which is that black people are part of the English society. He is against racism. He finds that sport is not far from racism therefore, he decides to write his Sports Plays. In these plays Williams depicts how the black players are treated by the white as if they are not English. This paper intends to analyse Roy Williams' *Sing Yer Heart out for the Lads* that deals with a football match between England and Germany. This study utilizes Alfred Adler's psychological theory that studies the issues of prejudice and racism by relating them to the surrounding culture.

Keywords: *football; inferiority; racial bullying; racism*

INTRODUCTION

Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads (2000) was presented by the National Theatre as part of their "Transformation" season before Roy Williams went on to the Royal Court. It is a fantastic illustration of how a steady stream of commissions has motivated writers to keep working. Roy Williams represents the aspiring generation of new writers that want to bring their own insight and experience to the stage. In 2000, The National Theatre built a production area named the Loft atop of the Lyttelton to start the "Transformation" season. They staged roughly six pieces over the course of fourteen weeks. Some of the plays were excellent, and it was an opportunity for the playwrights to witness their own work. *Sing Yer Heart out the Lads* was one of them (Billington, 2004).

The United Kingdom's main sport, football, looks to be "neglected" as a topic for theater (Bennett, 2013). In his book *Rewriting the Nations: British Theatre Today*, Aleks Sierz warns of the potential societal risks when he remarks: "Sport is central to our acting out of national identity, and football for example is a powerful arena for patriotic sentiment. It is also an area when national pride can degenerate into xenophobia" (2011, p.230). Through the use of football, Williams' art illustrates many cultural and psychological aspects in contemporary Britain. He uses football to act out pride, loyalty, love, and hatred. Such a work emphasizes that identity development, in an objective sense, is doomed to failure and that the concept of national identity implies a work in progress and a state of fluidity. Williams' *Sing Yer Heart out for the Lads*, which depicts football fervour developing into racist madness, is a painful illustration of how prejudice is profoundly ingrained in every element of multicultural London, including sports (Sierz, Middeke, and Schnierer, 2011).

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According to John Bennett, Williams' deftly constructed, intricate story about race and nationalism may very well be eligible for the coveted "great football play" label. Since it was a National Theatre production, there was a lot of press attention, almost all of it favourable. *Sing Yer Heart out for the Lads* serves as an illustration of the perils of national prejudice as well as the contradictory and complex character of national identity. By exposing inner-city racial conflict, pervasive bigotry, and characters' racist opinions, the drama explores what it implies to be English in the 21st century (Phillips, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

Alfred Adler is an early associate and student of Freud. He is among the earliest psychologists to speak for minorities and women's rights. He tried to focus on the social issues related to women and minors. He states that the feeling of inferiority (inferiority complex) results from such issues and often leads to major social troubles:

The key to the social process is the fact that people are always striving to find a situation in which they can excel. Thus, children who have a strong feeling of inferiority want to exclude bigger children and play with the younger or weaker ones whom they can dominate. This is an abnormal and pathological expression of the feeling of inferiority, for it is important to realize that it is not the sense of inferiority itself that matters but its degree and expression. (Alder, 1997, p.30)

Adler believes that social justice was the goal and the answer to people's difficulties. Everyone might cooperate peacefully if they were treated fairly. Their activities will be less concentrated on obsessive self-interest and proving their own value while continuously competing. People would devote their efforts to benefiting society more if they could have social justice to promote that. Individual psychology aims to help individuals be more effective and bounded in their daily lives, focusing on three aspects of culture: community, work, and relationships (McCluskey, 2021).

Thus, to discuss racism in relation to Adler's theoretical work is to focus on the social factor that promotes racism or diminishes it. It is indeed vital to highlight that socialisation is similar to every other psychological activity occurring within a person's mind, and it is among the most essential things. This social motivation allows the person to aim towards superiority or excellence. In some ways, collectivist civilizations see this as a quest for virtue. Adler describes this concept as the foundation, or the raw material with which a person might strive for excellence and build his/her own way of life. Sometimes, that implies to suppress and harm those deemed 'inferior' or 'bad' (2021, p.4).

Considering Adler's insights is significant in a moment when human civilization is exploring and seeking to resist white supremacy, and searching for intellectuals who call for reform. He suggests that "All our institutions, our traditional attitudes, our laws, our morals, our customs, give evidence of the fact that they are determined and maintained by privileged males for the glory of male dominate" (Adler, 2013: 123). The subject of social exclusion requires a multidisciplinary discussion, and Adlerian theoretical work can aid in the connection of disciplines in the explanation and understanding of social injustice like racism (McCluskey, 2021).

Football Game: Racial Identity

Bullying is a big issue that faces people from different ages and backgrounds, especially among children and youngsters (Musleh, 2018). The plot is influenced by nationalistic sentiments. This act serves as a prominent illustration of the football game serving as both a venue and a metaphor for racial prejudice and racial identity (Bennett, 2013). The superiority complex manifests in the white people's focus on their teams and their white players as something that lifts them above other teams and other racial minorities. Thus, as Aleks Sierz explains, supporting English team in the play is an indicator of cultural and white racial traditions "the index of identity" (*Nation* 2011, 15). Williams comments on the basic idea of the play, saying:

When I started the play, I knew I wanted to set it around a real match and I knew that game was coming up [...] And I just put all these people in a confined space and watched them do battle. In a way, they're all battling for what they perceive to be their England and that's what the debate is about. And it's still

going on today with all the questions about asylum-seekers—what kind of England do we want?
(Williams *In Conversation* 120)

Williams presents the attack of nationalist white racist people against Black or multi-racial families that live in Britain. His characters represent these two parts of the British society that stand for the conservative nationalist white parties and the liberated multi-racial ones. Thus, he always creates representative characters that stand for their age and race generally rather than representing themselves alone (Osborne, 2011, *Staging*, 220). Alan is a white man in his mid-fifties, he is a racist nationalist. Alan is put against Mark who is a young Black man:

MARK. I'm English.

ALAN. No you're not.

MARK. I served in Northern Ireland. I swore an oath of allegiance to the flag. [. . .] How English are you? Where do you draw the line as to who's English? I was born in this country. And my brother. You're white, your culture comes from northern Europe, Scandinavia, Denmark [. . .]

ALAN. The fact is, Mark, that the white British are a majority racial group in this country, therefore it belongs to the white British (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 84).

Saying British while suggesting English or saying English and intending British provides a puzzle of identification that has to be solved. Both of the play's protagonists and the audience need to come up with a solution to this debate that fits with their own interactions and connections in real life. The integration and exclusion dynamic is suggested by the English/British duality. As a result of England's associations with whiteness, there are, in some way, white patriotic feelings attached to it. While Britain is a manufactured assemblage of geopolitical emotions. Black British can never be English or a part of its self-declared dominion among the nations and territories of the United Kingdom according to this equation (Osborne, 2011, *Methuen*).

Gina and her father Jimmy are supposed to be racially neutral because they live in a place where different races coexist. They appear to be racial neutral when conducting business in the area of mixed races. However, both exhibit latent racism when provoked. Gina also exemplifies the conflicts brought on by inter-racial relationships. After being quite close to the Black previous soldier Mark, she leaves him for his friend in the police, Lee. Her actions have ended their friendship and caused sparks of racial accusations (Peacock, 2006). To Gina, being with Black people means deteriorating into a lower status.

Superiority-driven actions and behaviour in racist characters, like Alan, is a reflection of the modern and contemporary changes of social power. The white race has been privileged for centuries in Europe but the postmodern movements for rights and equality helped to change that somehow. Thus, the laws tried to make Alan and people like him unable to marginalise the Black people to feel their higher position. Yet, as long as that need is still inside the white people these laws remain unpractised and unprotected. Doreen Massey, a geography professor, sees that "a strong sense of place" can be a reaction to the "desire for fixity and for security of identity in the middle of [...] movement and change" (qtd. in Lipman 2020).

Barry's Inferiority

Williams dramatizes Barry's foolishness, constantly in the play. Since he is Black, white racists isolate and despise him for being Black. Yet, he accepts and mimics their anger and hatred for Germans. Williams mocks the so-called English conservatism, which via football fervour turns into a violent masculine mob hysteria, or hooliganism, that deviates from the positive image of English football supporters. Prejudices towards Germans and African-Americans expose and connect unpleasant parts of British culture. In the middle of the match heat, Lawrie identifies his hate for the Germans with that for the Black: "They're gonna walk over us, like everyone else!" (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 49).

Barry, the most passionate fan of all, chants "ENGERLAND! ENGERLAND! ENGERLAND!" and fills the bar with loud repetition: "Stand up if you won the war!" he exclaims (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 75). Given the significant (and historically underappreciated) efforts of Black military members to the overthrow of Nazi Germany, this is a claim he inherits from his family, significantly his soldier brother (Osborne, 2011, *Methuen* 498). He takes pleasure in his involvement in hooliganism and boasts anecdotally: "I backed you and Lee up when those bunch of Dutch fans[...] Then we roared, right into their faces, England!" (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 76).

Barry occupies an uncertain place which does not welcome him. He wants to identify with people of England but obviously this wish is not shared by other white people. Barry's striving to be English springs from the fact that his place as an outsider to England makes him inferior. He wants to feel the racial superiority of the white because he can never experience it with his black skin. According to Adler, people who want to be superior are "not in harmony with society. They are not socially well adjusted, and do not know how to solve the social problems of life" (1997, 35-36). Thus, "In Williams's plays black and white English cultures [...] challenge the concept of what it means to be black or white and English" (Peacock 2006).

Michael Billington persuasively argues that playwrights are on the right path when they adopt an explicitly political, professional approach and take a strong stance towards the policies of the government in their plays (qtd. in Eldridge 2003, 56). The strategies of politicians in popularising themselves can be summarised in creating an enemy and make a delusional victory over that. Most of the speech of the right-wing politicians address traditional values that strengthen this feeling of superiority over everything foreign and different. Williams identifies Alan with the right-wing politicians who adopt exclusory speech towards immigrants and Black people for no good reason except maintaining the traditional image of the country. Alan laments the present-day economic dominance of countries that lost the traditional dignity and solitude of being English. He is a representative of racially manifested superiority complex. In his book, *Understanding Life*, Alfred Alder says:

It seems to be a characteristic of human nature that when individuals either children or adults - feel excessively weak [whether physically, psychologically, or socially], they cease to be interested in others but strive only for superiority. As long as people [...] lack social interest, they are not prepared to solve life's problems. (1997, 40)

That shows why Alan and Larwi are quite fixated on their white privilege. They only seek power and dominance over the marginalised without wanting to use it for any good.

Contempt breeds hatred and a strive to marginalise others and feel victorious. This is the core theme of Williams' social criticism, which is the necessity for open communication between those who come from various cultures and have distinct wants and concern. Despite being racist, Alan opens up about the need that even though there are many races around, tolerance is not yet possible:

ALAN. [to Mark] Show me one white person who has ever treated you as an equal, and I will show you a liar. The minute one of them says they are going to treat you as an equal, they're not. Because, in order to do that, they have to see you differently (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 84).

Mark stoutly exclaims: "I served in Northern Ireland. I swore an oath of allegiance to the flag" (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 84). Considering his prior military experience, Mark's patriotic convictions are sharply underscored in the play. It is paradoxical that Mark will (perhaps) sacrifice his life for a nation where racists, like Alan, mock and reject Black people's right to be a part of it (Osborne, 2011, *Staging*). Even though Mark proves his worth for his country, racist citizens of no real value to the country, like Alan and Lawrie, believe themselves to be better than him. People's beliefs are strengthened by feelings of love or hate, and if they exclude coloured people, their feelings will blind them with further hate to legitimise this act. In his book, *Understanding Life*, Alfred Alder confirms: "Individuals' feelings always agree with their viewpoint of their task: the feelings strengthen their assumptions. We always do what we would do anyway, and our feelings are simply an accompaniment to our acts" (15).

Lawrie's Racism Against Black

Williams looks at the transfer of racial hatred across family members. He demonstrates this with Lawrie, Lee's brother. The latter is a nationalistic and racial bully who acquires his father's love of England's renowned football history. Lawrie publicly expresses his brutal passion to beat Black people and he calls them "coons," which suggests his anxiety about a changing country (Goddard 2015). Lawrie critiques the present lackluster match-play as proof of a loss of male traits that is caused by multiculturalism and a fall in nationalistic pride, he says: "[w]e better [win], restore some pride. The nation that gave the world football. (*Roars.*) Come on, you England!" (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 53).

For him, racism largely serves as an outlet for his inherent aggressiveness, which is then used by people like Alan to stir up inter-racial strife (Peacock, 2006). Lawrie reveals to his brother Lee: “I woulda killed someone by now if it weren’t for Alan. I really would, I can feel myself wantin to do it sometimes. Every morning when I wake up. I wanna make a bomb or summin, go down Brixton and blow every one of them up” (Williams,2013, *Sing* 88).

Lawrie’s personality is not the fictional creation of Williams. His racial bullying is inspired by real life racists and how they deal with football. According to Les Back, Tim Crabbe, and John Solomos, “Football is usually dealt with on the ground of race and nationalism” (2002, 83). In many football stadiums, incidents like racist screaming and abuse directed at Black players have been commonplace with the advent of Black players at all levels of the game. The intentionality of the fan discrimination at seventies and eighties was striking. In order to demonstrate their prejudice, fans would take bananas to hurl at Black players or send them hateful messages. In the early 1980s, Cyrille Regis competed for West Bromwich Albion along with two more Black players, Brendon Batson and Laurie Cunningham. He recalls:

We used to get letters all the time, you know . . . When I was called up for England for the first time there was a letter, an anonymous letter saying ‘If you go to Wembley and put on an England shirt you’ll get one of these through your knees’. There was a bullet in the envelope .(qtd.in Back, Crabbe and Solomos, 2002, 83)

While Lawrie might be written off as the stereotypical football loudmouth, Alan is a far-right extremist whose views are supported by persuasive reasons for racial segregation. He is the play’s most contentiously racist figure, “[i]f they want to practise their Black culture and heritage, then they should be allowed to do it in their own part of their world” (Williams,2013, *Sing* 56). Williams was inspired by British National Party literature to create Alan as a persuasive and seemingly reasonable man whose speech implies a lot of hate and irrational racism. William explains, “[i]t was important to me not to make him a devil. I wanted him to be charming, cool, and able to completely justify what he says” (Williams *Plays* x). Alan’s lengthy statements in the play’s second half are purposefully uncomfortable to witness because they feature radical viewpoints and draw into seldom spoken racial and national emotions (Goddard, 2015: 104). One of his extreme viewpoints is that even those that have non-English grandparents do not have a sufficient amount of cultural continuity in England to be considered English (Williams,2013, *Sing* 85).

Alan as a Representative of Cultural Racism

Alan exemplifies what is referred to be cultural prejudice. The so-called ‘new racism’ or ‘cultural racism’ functions in the cultural rather than biological sphere and emphasises cultural diversity above ‘race.’ In this new language, racial difference is ‘created’ in the context of culture by identification and ethnicity. It is not that racial bullying based on genetics no longer exists; rather, contemporary racial bullying is more likely to be communicated in other coded ways, veiled in stories, and covered up by systems that first suggest cultural distinctions above biological ones (Carrington and McDonald, 2002). Racism, then, is contextualized within certain social and economic contexts so that its tangible impacts may be seen for the racist to support their superiority speech. For instance, racist people like Alan no longer say ‘I am better than black ones’ merely because they are Black, but because of the ‘ignorance’ and ‘bad culture’ they bring with them. He demonstrates a complete image of a bully, in fact the psychological perpetration he commits against the black impacts everyone around him but he does not see that. The bullying act causes harm to more than the victim as it extends to include the perpetrator (Hadi, 2021).

The problem of football hooliganism is frequently and strongly linked with support for one’s own nation team during the initial debates about racism in football, which tended to regard the phenomena as an extension of that issue. Most studies’ depictions of racism are restricted to the actions of young, working-class white men, where racism and hooliganism are seen as intertwined societal phenomena (Back, Crabbe and Solomos 83). The society around the characters gives up the responsibility towards fixing them (Al-Dhuhoori and Yaiche ,2022). For this reason, Alan tells Barry “Follow your local team” (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 70) as Barry’s culture and status are not seen as good enough for Alan to be in the same line of audience cheering for the same team. Alan’s sense of superiority goes far enough to prohibit his ‘inferiors’ from liking the same things as he does.

Even though, Alan dislikes foreign football hooliganism but is willing to utilise Lawrie's brutality for his own ends. Lawrie says, "It's about being English," (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 97) to which Alan taunts him by equating him with the people he despises. Alan says: "That wasn't been [sic] English, you were acting like a bunch of savages. You were no better than the coons" (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 97). His only concern is not the fact that someone else might be hurt from the use of violence, but that if he uses violence the legitimacy of his racial segregation will be weakened. He wants the 'English' to behave with civility, and the 'others' to remain "a bunch of savages". To which Mark responds:

MARK. How English are you? Where do you draw the line as to who's English. I was born in this country. And my brother. You're white, your culture comes from northern Europe, Scandinavia, Denmark. Your people moved from there thousands of years ago, long before the Celtic people and the Beaker [sic] people, what? You think cos I'm black, I don't read books. Where do you draw the line? (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 84).

Alan's response demonstrates the hollowness of his seemingly intelligent arguments: "That's exactly the kind of ridiculous question we have to deal with" (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 84). Barry's enthusiasm for being English may be problematical, as seen by the other Black characters in the play, such as Bad T, a teenager, who responds, "I ain't watching no rubbish English match. They lose at everything" (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 14). In a similar vein, Barry's brother Mark had an inter-racial love and friendship with Glen's white pup owner Gina and joined the army, pledging allegiance to the nation and the monarchy. However, he leaves after growing frustrated with the racial bullying of his leaders and has since established an intense responsiveness to racial politics that supports his marginalised position (Goddard, 2015).

Thus, Mark's refusal of mingling with the white comes from reason and experience unlike Barry's enthusiasm that is driven by his search for pride and confidence with the dominating white majority. When Mark urges Barry to "[w]ipe that shit off your face," (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 37) he repeats the awkwardness of racial mixing that was previously discussed. Mark initially declines to stay and watch the game by warning his younger sibling against naively thinking that being born in England guarantees acceptance as one of the 'English' automatically. Barry is struggling with complex identity issues as he goes through a sensitive time which is that of early youth and late teenage. This is the time that individuals discover their sense of belongingness (Al-Qraghuli & AL-Ukayli 2018). The problem of nationalism can be felt from the intensity of language. He warns his brother:

BARRY. [...] We are British, we are here! [...]
MARK. They don't want us here (Williams, 2013, *Sing* 77).

Characters are equally moulded by the racism monster, which is not just a simple Black -white conflict. Mark and Gina's ex-relationship, which was replaced by Lee and Gina's ex-relationship and Lee's acquaintance with Mark, has been plagued by unsolved jealousies and hatreds stemming not from racial divide but from the much more significant issue of cultural clash. In the end, Mark's killing by Gina's son, Glen, solidifies the duality by reflecting not just two football teams but also the "Us" against "Them" division. There is no returning home after the crime, unlike in a football match (Osborne, 2011, *Methuen* 498). Glen's character has been twisted through his relationship with bad gangster groups and his mothers' racism. The role of the parents is to encourage and enlighten their children to protect them from such wrongdoings (Hatem and Mohammed Baqer, 2022). However, Gina is far away from her role as a mother.

Barry, the only Black person remaining in the pub after the white teenager Glen stabs his brother, becomes enraged and wants to murder his white while erasing the cross of St. George off his face. Cultural diversity appears to be a faraway dream with the end of the play (Peacock, 2006). The bar represents a white island that is being persecuted, surrounded by furious Black adolescents. Williams ends the book with the auditory allusion to the terrible relationship between an organisationally racist police service and Black residents' experiences with the legal justice system (Osborne, 2011, *Methuen* 499). The play, thus, ends without any proper answer to the nationalism issue, it ends only with the "Sound of police sirens approaching" (Ibid, 97). This conclusion is a realistic one as the issue of racism cannot be resolved without ending the racial marginalisation that sets one group as superior to the other.

CONCLUSION

Roy Williams' *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* is one of his sports plays. It scrutinizes a very vital issue that is football and racism. Sport can unite and divide the nation at the same time. Racism against black football players will never stop because the white are not going to give those black players the chance to be part of them. They consider the black as the others as if they do not belong to the English society. That is why this play can be regarded as a scream against all those who do not want to give the black their rights to be equal.

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