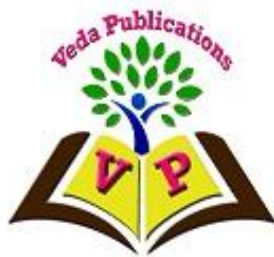


**UNDERSTANDING BLACK SUBJECTIVITY IN *NO PLACE LIKE HOME***

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Gary Younge is an author and journalist. He writes for The Guardian, based in London. Inspired by the history of Freedom Riders and Civil Rights Movements, he travels through American South following the same route as followed by the original freedom riders of 1960s. *No Place Like Home* is a travel account based on his journey. Younge meets civil rights activists and tries to explore the present condition of the South by comparing with its past. The present paper discusses his black identity among predominantly white society. As a black person Younge encounters many problems in white dominated society. The present paper aims at the understanding bigotry in Younge's travelogue *No Place Like Home*.

**Keywords:** *Freedom Riders, Black, Identity, Language, Civil Rights.*

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*No Place Like Home* is a travel account based on historical research. Here Younge gives a new perception on race relations in America. In this book Younge through his conversation with civil rights activists tries to explore the history. He visits schools, universities, military establishment and tracks long lost cousins. It is also a journey towards self discovery. Before beginning his travel he asks from an American journalist what kind of reaction he can expect as a black Briton during this journey. His answer surprises Younge, 'Well, when they hear your accent, white American will usually add twenty points to your IQ, But when they see your face, they most definitely won't' (Younge, "How an English

Block" 104). All other qualities of a person are ignored if he bears dark complexion. Fredrickson also observes:

The injustice to blacks was not so much that they were rigorously separated from whites but that they were usually treated as lower class whatever their actual social attainments. (261)

Gary Younge's journey through American South by following the same route as followed by the original Freedom Riders forms the basis of his travelogue. Younge himself is black born and brought up in Britain. He is the son of immigrants from Barbados. As a child Younge has felt racial problems



prevalent in British society, so he wants to explore the racial problems of the region. He has taken a keen interest in the history of Civil Rights Movement. So he chooses to undertake this journey and tries to explore the history of Freedom Riders. The origin of Freedom Rides as described by Arsenault:

In 1946 the most active members of this radical vanguard were affiliated with two interrelated organizations, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and its parent organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). It was within these groups that the idea of the Freedom Ride was born. (23)

James Farmer, the founder of CORE organized the rides of 1960s to remove the segregation. The activist planned to ride by bus from Washington to New Orleans. In 1954 Brown vs the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas outlawed the principle of 'separate but equal'. Even after Supreme Court's approval for removal of segregation, there was discrimination against blacks. Six whites and seven blacks assembled for the Freedom Rides on 1 May 1961. Gary Younge talks about their strategy:

The plan was simple. They would split up into two groups; the first would travel by Greyhound, and the second on Trailways. Whites would travel at the back of the buses, and blacks at the front—the direct opposite of custom, practice and, in some places, local law in the South. At every stop, blacks would get off and use the white-only facilities, and whites use the black-only facilities. (28)

In his book *No Place Like Home*, Younge also tries to explore the present condition of the South by comparing with its past. The book is divided into ten chapters and an epilogue entitled 'Homecoming'. First two chapters are entitled as 'The Unlikely Lads' and 'Five Point South' indicating at Younge's black identity. Chapter three to nine are entitled according to places visited by Younge during his journey to the South. These places are Washington DC, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. Tenth chapter entitled 'History's Shadow' relates the story of the leader of Freedom Riders

James Farmer. Richard Gray describes the reason behind this journey:

Younge's interest was, however, racially inflected, in that it was the racial problems of the region that also intrigued him: which is why he chose to take the journey he had. (143)

Younge tells his experiences as a child in Stevenage. The white children used to tease Younge and other black children. Their mother always advised them to escape fighting with white children because she knew that her children would be blamed as they are black. Once Younge's mother herself called the police but the response of the police inspector was shocking to them as he said, 'I am afraid that you are an ethnic minority in this area and you are going to have to put up with that kind of thing from time to time' (10). Younge heard the words 'ethnic minority' first time and asked its meaning from his mother. She replied, 'It meant we were black and, according to the policeman, it also meant people could do what they wanted to us, and we couldn't complain' (10). According to Kyriakides and Torres:

Because of the privileging of sensation as an empirical tool, skin color, and so pigmentation as a visible marker, signified a measure of rational capacity. White skin meant rational and black skin meant irrational. (17)

A black family can expect three types of reactions from white society in Stevenage: welcome, toleration or despise. As Younge tells, 'There were those who, like her (Mrs. Stilling), welcomed us. There were those who tolerated us. There were those who positively despised us' (8).

After finishing the school Younge has taught Eritrean refugees in Sudan for one year. During this time he finds that things are gradually changing in Stevenage. 'Study Eddy could no longer promise his children anything anymore, because there were no longer any certainties. His own job was under threat' (5). Now Younge begins to feel culturally alien in his native land. He begins to realize his black subjectivity. Erica Still comments on black subjectivity:



'Black Subjectivity' is a diasporic sensibility lived out in local, particular ways. On the one hand the scope of black subjectivity is quite narrow: it simply indicates a self awareness as one who is racially coded as a person of African descent in a world that has systematically subjugated and persecuted such people on the basis of that racial code. (Introduction)

Younge's mother has prepared her children to cope with racism. She has created the Barbadian atmosphere at her house. At home they feel they are in Barbados. Younge tells that for them, 'The English were these 'other' people with whom we mixed all day but who were different from us in the most basic ways. Of course, we liked many of them. But, as many of them would never let us forget, we were also unlike them' (11). They refer Barbados as their home. Younge has to suffer multiple identity as he tells, 'If we were at home, and mum was chiding us for being too 'English', then we were Bajan. If we were at school, and someone was telling to go back to where we came from, we would say we were British' (12). Younge notices that everybody in America lays claim to double identity such as Italian-American, Irish-American, African-American etc. They use hyphen to show their title. Identity is related to the character of a person. It tells about his qualities, belief, and belonging as Chris Weedon defines identity:

Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality. But it is also about your relationships, your complex involvement with others and in the modern world these have become ever more complex and confusing. (1)

The hyphenated identity implies a dual identity. It brings a question regarding belongingness of a person which side of hyphen he belongs to. This situation is generally faced by the immigrants in America. These people take pride in their past, so they demonstrate dual identity. The hyphenated identity has become an important feature of

American culture. Maha El Said writes about this change in American culture, 'This ethnic revival is fundamentally based on a search for one's root, a search for ancestral link, a search for a group to belong to creating a self that has continuity between past and present' ( qtd in Sharobeem). A black Briton does not come with a hyphen because, 'They are two separate words relating of two very distinct and often conflicting identities' (185). Race remains an important factor in deciding the identity of a person. Before civil rights era it is regarded that, 'black children had a more negative orientation to their own race than white children' (Cross "Shades of Black"). In recent time black identity is described as the concept of 'racial group identification'. Broman etal defines it as, 'the feeling of closeness to similar others in ideas, feeling and thought' (148). While writing this book Younge was also interested in issues of racial identities as he tells to Tim Youngs in an interview:

I'm interested in race: I think it's an interesting, important issue. But for the book I didn't just want to write about race... To be honest it is a motif: the Freedom Riders, but it gave me a structure and the South gave me a place to explore issues that I'm interested in: America, race, personal identity. (qtd in Forberg 333)

Younge's black subjectivity has remained the main reason of humiliation among white people. In this book he tells many experiences where his black identity is hurt. He recalls an experience of his childhood when he went on a trip with black youth group by a bus. Their bus stopped at red light. Younge noticed that a group of notorious boys was coming towards their bus. They shouted 'Nigger! Nigger!' and tried to rock the coach. As they ran forward, the bus driver jumped the light. The atmosphere changed from fear to relief. Younge's mother remarked after this incident, 'it was a good thing we had a black driver, because a white one would not have known to jump the lights' (22). After this incident Younge thinks about the Freedom Riders. This experience drowns him 'in a tidal wave of harrowing emotional flashback. It drew them back slowly, as though through a filter that shut out my forty-five seconds of isolated helplessness and



allowed a sense of dignity and perspective to seep through. Before, I had been watching history unraveling in a faraway place. Now, it felt closer and more immediate' (22).

During this visit Younge meets his cousin Natlie and her friend Lenell. On the first night Younge takes them out for a meal. They talk about politics and other matters but the main topic of their conversation is love relationships between black and white. He tells about his past relationships with white girls. Younge always found that white women's parents were racists. He was insisted to meet their parents in order to change their minds. Younge had no interest in getting to know a racist. Finally he realized that, 'this racism thing appears to be hereditary. And then we would break up' (55). After this bitter experience Younge decided "Life was too short to go out with white women unless they had basic level of racial awareness" (55).

Younge also witnesses the segregation on religious grounds. He writes, 'The most segregated hour in the Southern week is eleven o' clock on a Sunday morning. That is when blacks and whites put on their best togs and go to separate building to worship the same God' (143). Younge visits a white Baptist church. Here he has a strange experience. When he enters the church the man at the door of the church gives a sideways glance at him. He says hello to the man and enters the church. In the church he realizes his black subjectivity as he writes:

From every angle, I could feel eyes on me – from the balcony, from the left and the right and even from behind, eyes that bored into my melanin and stripped me of everything that did not pertain to my race. I have never felt so black. (150)

At Greensboro, Younge watches some comedy shows but cannot enjoy them because these jokes are aimed at blacks. He writes, 'I did not particularly like the idea of sitting in a room full of white people, about five minutes from where I was chased, and laughing at other black people'(100).

Younge reaches to Savannah to meet his aunt Judy. She lives here with her husband Charles and her son Ajani. Ajani has no confusion about his national identity. When anyone asks him about his belonging, he says America. But Younge is confused

about his national identity. He recalls the time when he taught Eritrean refugees, 'I had two free countries to choose from, complete with passports, borders and national sports teams that the whole world recognized, and still I couldn't make up mind about where I was from'(168). Younge realizes that:

Identities suffocate if trapped in the narrow confines of a definition for too long. But everyone needs a working title. From then on I decided I could be black and British and anyone who wanted to challenge my claim to either of these could expect a ferocious response. (168)

He shows his dilemma as the son of an immigrant parents in Britain. He says that, 'growing up as the child of an immigrant, I inherited a distinct sense of precariousness and vulnerability in Britain. My mother arrived in a 'host country' and therefore was often treated like a 'guest'. If she over-stayed her welcome or questioned the host's hospitality, she might be denounced as an ingrate and shown the door'(169).

Younge comes to the office of the Mississippi NAACP. The state secretary Wendell Paris tells, "You can have one town that has changed, but you go fifteen miles up the road, and nothing has changed" (254). The response of white and black is different regarding Younge's personal safety in the South as he tells:

Whites would generally treat any anxiety about the prospect of a racial assault as a personal insult and shrug it off with assurances that everything was different now. Blacks always started by admitting that they have no idea what might happen but would advise me to beware all the same. (254)

Younge's only defense to save him from this geopolitical condition is his English accent. Language remains most important tool for conveying the ideas in postcolonial literature. The long history of colonialism has established important connections with English language. Chris Searle, British writer and anti-racist activist, gives his views on English in the world:

Let us be clear that the English language has been a monumental force and institution of



oppression and rapid exploitation throughout 400 years of imperialist history. It attacked the black person with its racist images and imperialist message. (qtd in Pennycook 6)

As the language of colonizers, English remains the familiar language to majority of postcolonial writers. They reflect their history and culture through this language. Many construction of self and other were produced by English during colonialism. So it is deeply interwoven with the discourses of colonialism and post colonialism.

The language lies at the heart of the formation of postcolonial identities. Younger's only defense to protect himself from the white's antagonism is his English accent. When people hear his voice they think him as a white British. Here Younger relates his experiences related to this type of situation. Before some time, he visited a high school in a Mississippi town where everything was still segregated. There were two principals, one black and one white. Younger wanted to interview both the principals and telephoned them. The black principal refused him and the white principal agreed for the interview. But when Younger presented himself before the white principal, 'his jaw dropped. I was black. The only thing, it seems, that could possibly be more surprising than meeting someone roaming around Mississippi who had been to Baldock was for that person to be black. To be fair, he didn't appear disappointed or annoyed, just stunned'(84). After a little discussion he asked Younger to talk to the black principal. Younger expected that he would not talk to him but surprised to hear when the black principal felt sorry for his refusal. He said, 'I am so sorry. When you called I thought you were white. I've had enough of white people coming here and digging up this thing. If I had know' (85).

At Baptist church, when the sermon is over, Younger rises with an intention of leaving the church as quickly as possible. But a woman comes to him and welcomes him in the white church. She asks about Younger's belongingness. When Younger tells her that he is English, there is a change in the behavior of the people who were earlier looking hatefully at him. 'Within seconds there was a mini-

stampede of people coming to shake my hand vigorously and thank me for coming'(153).

During the interview with Mr. Cobbs, a spokesman for the local branch of the NAACP, Roshelle Guynn, a female friend of Mr. Cobbs arrives. After the interview she offers to Younger to take him to a motel. She wants to make Younger as a role model for her son, Justin. She tells her son, 'Justin, you know I want to introduce you to as many positive role models as possible'(81). Younger surprisingly writes about this incident, 'I wondered whether Ms Guynn would award me a Pulitzer before the day was out' (81). Finally she takes him to a motel. She also tells about Justin's teacher Ms Solomons. In the motel room, Younger thinks about his next day which has been planned by Mrs. Guynn. He thinks about the odd situation related to his black skin and English accent.

Mrs. Guynn cannot believe that a black person can have English accent. She surprisingly comments about appearance of Younger and his English accent, 'That's weird. It's just that you look like us. You just don't sound like us' (93). She asks Younger if he thinks himself as English or American. Younger answers:

I think of myself as black mostly, but English as well. England is where I was born and where I grew up. That's where my passport's from and where I can vote.(93)

During this trip a new page of history opens before Younger at every step when he talks to the survivors of civil rights movement and freedom rides. In Richmond, Younger goes to meet Oliver Hill. Hill is a ninety year old attorney and civil rights veteran. Hill was an ambitious black man. He waged, 'war with the American judiciary to bring about the end of legal segregation through his work on the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case' (58). He tells Younger that, 'Nowadays we are dealing with the same issues. The white men still don't want to accept Negroes as fully fledged citizens. All immigrant minorities strove to be white, and all of them were accepted as white unless their skin was a little bit too dark' (61). Hill thinks that in England the condition of black people is different from the South. They don't face racial assaults. To remove this illusion Younger recalls his experience in England and tells the reality:



Just about every time I return to the country I have to deal with an immigration official who will put my passport under a special light and ask me lots of dopey questions because he thinks I might have stolen it. Even now, there are places – pubs and restaurants mostly – right in the centre of London that don't allow black people in unless they have to. (62)

Younge also tells that there were never laws in England against segregation, like there were in America. He shows his parents' plight, 'You can't legislate for the unfriendly stares my parents received when they went house hunting' (62).

The sit-in in Greensboro was a very effective movement. It was led by students. Mc Cain was one of them. Younge meets Mc Cain and thanks him for agreeing to speak to him. In the beginning of their movement they asked other people to join them but finally they realized that it is useless to convince people. They were inspired by the history of Jesus, Gandhi and Bethune who began their task with a few people. McCain tells:

We were all Christians by upbringing and we took a lot of motivation from this man called Jesus. He had twelve followers and they weren't even reliable and look how much he achieved. And then there was Gandhi, who kicked the hell out of the British. And then there was Mary McLeod Bethune, who set up a school with nothing but a dream. So we knew that throughout history, any single event that occurred was carried out by very few people. (110)

In Anniston Roosevelt Parker, the local spokesman for NAACP comes to pick him at his hotel. Parker was seventeen years old during the time the freedom riders came there but he did not actually see the bus burn. The Anniston police during the freedom ride was not protective. Parker tells, 'Yeah whenever the Klan were around, you could never find the police. Because the police were the Klan' (198). To know the history of freedom riders day in Anniston, Younge meets three persons: John Morris, Reverend Cleveland Jones and Mr. Gordon Rodgers. After meeting these persons Younge goes to the

place where the old bus station used to be and where Klan slashed the tyres.

During Younge's visit to The Southern Poverty Law Centre, Penny Weaver advises him to meet two people Barbara Edwards, a trade union organizer and Gowen Patton, an activist. Barbara Edwards married a black man and gave birth to a black son, Jim. Edwards faced many problems due to his association with blacks. She tells, 'In Martinsville, Virginia, local whites hung her kittens and wrote 'nigger lover' on her trailer. 'They scared me, but I didn't let them see that. To them I was sport. They did everything but kill me' (213). Whenever she was arrested, black people supported her and looked after her son. Now she is accused as, 'a black nationalist'. She is, 'living and thriving in the heart of the local black community' (212). She is not black but she is very much part of the black community.

The last chapter of the book entitled History's Shadow, recalls one of the most famous historical personalities of Freedom Riders, James Farmer. A month after Younge's journey James Farmer, the former leader of the CORE, who is now blind, is honored with the presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award in the United States. Younge meets James Farmer and asks, 'Why he thought his contribution to the civil rights struggle was never fully recognized.' (269). He tells two reasons. First that he was in the shadow of Martin Luther King. The other reason is that he had a white wife.

In order to explore the Southern history, Younge has not only talked to historical personas but also visits to historical places related to black history. Younge has visited many public places that reflect the history of blacks such as Kelly Ingram Park, the Civil Rights Institute, Institute in Birmingham, February One Street, Greensboro and the Martin Luther King Centre, Atlanta. These visits suggest that, 'the political culture of the United States is underpinned by a notion of right and wrong which lies above that of partisanship. By admitting to having been wrong, it maintains the ability to claim it has also been right. That leaves enough political space for African-Americans to join in the national project' (219). But it does not mean that racial wounds of these societies have healed.





Younge goes to the Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham. When he reads or watches a thing related to civil rights era, it brings a strange feeling in him. He says, 'it feels as though a colony of frozen ants have been unleashed between your flesh and your muscle and are running wild around your torso. They will crawl all over you and then disappear as quickly as they came' (201). Younge goes to the Delta and stops by the Tallahatchie River. It reminds him of Emmett Till who was killed and thrown in the river. He was accused of flirting with a white woman. After comparing between Till and himself, Younge finds many similarities between the both. So he feels fearful at this place. He writes about his feelings:

I felt alone in a dark place, a long way from anywhere, not just physically, but politically, morally and culturally. I was afraid for the first time on my trip: afraid of all the small, ugly personal histories that might be hidden by the night, the river and the long grass; haunted by the bodies that went missing, the indignities that went unavenged and the lies that stood uncorrected. (256)

He felt, 'if a group of white youth drove past and saw me, nothing would matter but my race' (257). That night Younge stopped in the small town of Senatobia. He came to the Comfort Inn. The young white woman at the reception said there were no rooms. It was very surprising because there were not more than three or four cars in the car park. 'This was the first time since the beginning of my journey that I had been turned away from a motel – even in Greensboro during homecoming weekend and the barbecue festival I had found a room. And this was the smallest place I had stopped on my travels' (257). He can't believe that people can do things like this.

After spending six months roaming around the South, Younge feels that this trip has made him bold and sassy. He writes, 'I had been confirmed, assured and supported: Black Southerners might have been confused by my British accent, but they were keen to embrace my blackness'. After coming home Younge feels that 'there are friends to whom I will not have to explain myself: people who don't think I'm speaking Russian when I'm actually speaking English; people who are not stunned by the very fact of me and who live in a country where

nationalism is still viewed with skepticism and segregation is not de rigueur' (274). He is now home with the understanding of his bigotry.

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