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Race, Roots and Revelation – Reviewing Jonathan Escoffery’s *If I Survive You*

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Escoffery, Jonathan. *If I Survive You*, Harper Collins, 2022, pp.272, £14.99, ISBN: 978-0-008-50121-1.

Jonathan Escoffery’s debut novel *If I Survive You* (2022) is a compilation of eight interlinked stories which revolve around an immigrant family from Jamaica grappling with racial oppression in the U.S. Longlisted for the 2023 Man Booker Prize, the provocative novel deals with the sensitive issues of immigration, racial oppression, sibling rivalry, financial hardships and identity crisis of the Jamaican immigrants struggling for survival in a White-dominated American milieu. Set against the background of the political violence in Jamaica in the 1970s, the novel depicts the family’s hardships after they relocate to Miami. It features multiple characters, who go through their life journeys and transform themselves into mature individuals. Trelawny, the protagonist, navigates his journey from a romantic to a self-aware individual, echoing the themes of a coming-of-age narrative. Deeply layered and original in structure, the novel brings out the gradual decay of a family frantically chasing the American Dream.

The stories oscillate between first, second and third-person narratives providing a unique structure to the novel. Out of the pivotal characters in the novel, Trelawny emerges as the most promising voice trying to assert his position in a foreign landscape, which ironically happens to be his birthplace. Trelawny’s life is very similar to any black immigrant subjected to exclusion because of a dark skin tone. The opening story, “In Flux” shows the anxiety of a nine-year-old Trelawny searching for a sense of belonging among his friends, who constantly questions his racial features. The title of the

first story is relevant to Trelawny's existential crisis, bereft of familial love and affection. He is sometimes referred to as a "Nigga", a "Yankee" and at other times, a "Black-American". Trelawny relentlessly reflects on his ethnic origin, whenever he is confronted with the question, "What are You?"(3). It becomes a painful exercise for him, as he struggles to explain his ambiguous identity in a multicultural landscape that makes him vulnerable to his judgmental friends. In his insightful book review of *If I Survive You*, Ian Williams remarks, "Just give the boy some security, some freedom and a sense of belonging and much of his angst would evaporate". Unfortunately, Trelawny fails to find a home. The young man is disconnected from his family and seeks comfort in his dreams to achieve success in life. Trelawny's existential crisis evolves from the neglect of his parents, especially his father, Topper who calls him defective. Growing up as a young child, Trelawny develops a toxic trait of despising his father and elder brother, only to prove his worth. Throughout the first story, Trelawny's struggles are realistic, resonating with countless young immigrants ostracized on account of their diasporic blackness. Trelawny is homeless, both literally and metaphorically. Trelawny can neither communicate through Spanish nor engage in an emotional connection with anyone. He remains trapped in an "in-between" space, neither too white to classify as an American nor too black to identify as a Jamaican. His distorted identity secludes him and simultaneously fuels his desire to fit into a thriving American ecosystem that he cannot afford to leave.

The second story is narrated from the perspective of Trelawny's father, Topper who takes the narrative back to the times he married Sanya hoping that their children will bring them prosperity. Topper speaks in a Jamaican patois accent, which adds a touch of authenticity to his struggles. Topper is quite a sympathetic character since he has never achieved the success he dreamt of. His hopeless search for a homeland shows the vulnerability of a Black immigrant thwarted by a capitalist American society. Topper's struggle to be identified as an ideal husband, a good father and most importantly, a provider for his family, is heart-wrenching. Topper is deprived of everything- parental love, a happy family, a stable income and permanent shelter which become the reasons for the unrest between him and his wife, Sanya. His situation is similar to any typical family

man trying to provide the best for his family in the face of odds. Navigating life's hardships, Topper loses out on everything and lives with the guilt of separation from his wife. The title of the story is symbolic, where the "Ackee tree" stands as a symbol for the conflict between the two sons of Topper, Delano and Trelawny. The Ackee tree in the story represents the Jamaican culture, reflected in Topper's mannerisms.

In the third story "Odd Jobs", the narrative again shifts to Trelawny, who recounts the various lowly jobs he has engaged himself in the past few years. He goes on to do several odd jobs, sometimes working for an ad agency and at other times, doing short-term internships that barely fetch him any money. Williams in his review talks about Trelawny's reckless attitude when he takes up an unethical job for the privilege of "a toilet on which to sit and unload your twisted clogged colon", just for the sake of survival. The story reveals the reckless side of Trelawny, a passionate youth who believes in his potential to earn a huge fortune. His struggles transform him, and he becomes deeply involved in the Capitalist rush to secure a prosperous future. Trelawny bonds with several people around him, meet old friends and acquaintances and shares his struggles to find a respectable position for himself. His psychological scars become apparent when he remembers his father's aversion towards him. Trelawny's confessions in the story hint at his repressed hatred against his father who he believes is the reason for his fragmented existence. Trelawny believes that he would prove his father wrong by proving himself better than his elder brother Delano (81). Trelawny's ambitions numb his senses, and his aggressive behaviour to exact revenge on his elder brother shows his immaturity at a tender age.

The longing for a home is constantly echoed throughout the novel, be it the residence back in Jamaica or the one in Miami. Trelawny has no fond memories of his roots, but he does witness the devastation caused by Hurricane Andrew that hit Miami. Trelawny reminds the readers of Pip's embarrassing connections with his home. Pip remarks, "It is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home...Home had never been a very pleasant place to me..." (Dickens 104) The story "Pestilence" is a similar account of Trelawny's ambiguous relationship with his family, and most importantly, the indistinct idea of a home. While the physical

devastation is caused by Hurricane Andrew, the psychological and generational divide in the family stems from “poverty” that plagues their lives.

Escoffery excels in portraying the character of Cukie, one of Trelawny’s cousins who shares the same fate as the former. Cukie can be seen as an antithesis of his father Ox who hardly cared for his son. The story “Splashdown” is a brilliant testimony to Cukie’s passion to dive into the past and find the reason for his abandonment. The story has flashbacks of Cukie’s childhood turmoil, his longing to experience fatherly love and most importantly, his desire to protect his mother. Cukie’s abilities to deal with his identity crisis and shoulder familial responsibilities simultaneously make him one of the most mature characters in the novel. His character is an urgent reminder to make peace with a troubled past and look for a promising future ahead. Cukie’s act of jumping into the water and emerging with a splash is symbolic of his transformation from a nostalgic son to a responsible father.

The idea of living an independent life and providing for their partners gradually leaves the two brothers disillusioned. The mad pursuit of wealth and prosperity leads to a gradual decay of their morality. On multiple occasions, Trelawny feels guilty for causing suffering to his family members, but his fragile ego stops him from transforming. He reminds himself, “You want a home. You want to win back your girlfriend’s admiration. You want to prove that your father bet on the wrong son. But you don’t say any of this...” (239) Delano, his elder brother, too concludes when his wife calls him a liability (Escoffery 186). Delano accepts the defeat when he feels “an odd sense of euphoria in accepting this fact” (186). It is when their partners abandon them, that they realise what they have lost in the process of chasing social visibility. This is like an epiphany, a beginning of realisation, as a composed Delano “remembers his purest, most concentrated self” (203).

Trelawny’s life takes a turn when his gigantic dreams gradually collapse. His childhood memories return to him when he finally confronts his father. His casual affairs do not bring him peace, and he finally understands that it was never about defeating his brother, and that beating him was not a route to get what he needed (253). He

reflects on his decisions and decides not to return to his girlfriend, Jelly since he understands that they can never end up together (254). Trelawny can be seen as a modern representation of Dickens' Pip, as he realizes the improbability of a romantic relationship with Jelly. His realization reflects the growth and refinement in his character, and ultimately brings him closer to his family.

Trelawny's transformation into a forgiving character is the finest achievement of Escoffery's experiments with creating a bildungsroman. The themes of race, identity and self-discovery are well-sewn together to form a coherent plot. The story-within-a-story format of the novel unravels a plentitude of experiences shared by immigrants in the Capitalist American society. Despite the ambiguity of the patois language, the novel speaks a lot more through the backgrounds of the characters and retains its potential to connect with a large group of readers. The sufferings of the characters haunt the readers until the end and the complex questions of cultural identity, racism and familial conflicts make it a rich and versatile text worthy of appreciation.

Works Cited

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