



Cliff, Michelle (b. 1946)

by Linda Rapp

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Jamaican-born writer Michelle Cliff explores issues of race, class, and sexuality in her prose and poetry. At once a child of privilege as a light-skinned woman and an outsider because of her embrace of her African heritage and her lesbianism, she brings a unique perspective to her commentary on post-colonial society in the Caribbean.

The daughter of an American father and a Jamaican mother, Michelle Cliff was born in Kingston, Jamaica on November 2, 1946. When she was three years old her family moved to New York City in hopes of finding greater economic opportunity. Some seven years later they returned to Jamaica, where her father was going to start his own business.

In a 1981 interview Cliff described the move as "disastrous." Her father, she said, "started living the high life: drinking a lot, going to the race track, and gambling." After a few years the family returned to the United States.

After graduating from high school Cliff enrolled in Wagner College on Staten Island. She began to take an interest in politics and became active in the movement against the war in Vietnam.

When Cliff was twenty-two, her mother "officially" informed her that she was a person of color, something that the light-skinned Cliff had already discerned from indirect messages as she was growing up. The heritage that her family attempted to conceal was one that Cliff chose to embrace.

Following her graduation from Wagner, Cliff went to England, where she studied at the University of London, earning a master's degree in philosophy in 1974. In the course of her studies she read the works of the neo-platonists on platonic--that is, same-sex--love, which, she stated, gained an "elite place" in her thinking.

It also took on importance in her life and identity as she became romantically involved with another woman for the first time and began the process of coming out as a lesbian. At the same time she was exploring what it meant to be a person of color.

Cliff did not enjoy support from her family when she acknowledged her sexual orientation. She was already estranged from her father, who had left her mother. Cliff's mother was not accepting of her lesbianism. "She thinks I've made the worst mistake I could ever have possibly made," said Cliff in 1981.

After earning her degree in London in 1974, Cliff returned to the United States and worked as an editor at W. W. Norton. She also began writing poetry, and in 1976 she became the life partner of poet Adrienne Rich, whose own explorations into the significance of her Jewish heritage undoubtedly influenced Cliff's investigations into her own complex racial and social background.

Her first book, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (1980), was a collection of poems reflecting

her thoughts on racial prejudice and on the cultural pressures on light-skinned people like her to deny their heritage and pass for white. She also addressed the widespread homophobia in Jamaica that leads many queer people to hide their sexual orientation. By writing about these issues, Cliff said, she was "claiming--in a way, demanding--to be a whole person."

Cliff published more poems in *The Land of Look Behind: Prose and Poetry* (1985), but her focus was increasingly on writing fiction.

In her first novel, *Abeng* (1984), she introduced Clare Savage, a thirteen-year-old light-skinned Jamaican who, like Cliff herself, identifies as black in defiance of social expectations.

The Savage family represents a microcosm of Jamaican society: Clare's father denies any African ancestry and attempts to inculcate his racism in his daughter, while Clare's "red" (i.e., mixed race) mother typically bows to her husband's expectations that their light-skinned child should accept a privileged social position, eschewing the richness of the culture of her mother's family.

It is, however, to the feminine side that Clare is most drawn. She sees her Afro-Jamaican grandmother as a woman of knowledge, healing, magic, and connections with family tradition, and she longs for acceptance by her matrilineage.

Clare moves between two distinctly different social worlds--an elite urban school and her grandmother's farm, where she befriends a dark-skinned girl. Even her language changes: she speaks "proper English" among the privileged, and Jamaican patois with her friend in the country.

The young Clare is most struck by oppression based on race (or the perception of it) in post-colonial Jamaican culture, but she also becomes aware of the power of other privileged groups, as evidenced in institutionalized sexism and heterosexism.

In Cliff's second novel, *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), Clare goes to England, hoping that in the supposedly more benevolent "mother country" she will find a refuge from the racism of the colonies; however, a violent demonstration by white supremacists that disrupts the tranquility of her university seminar sends her back to Jamaica, resolved to work against social injustice and to claim her own identity as a person of color.

She joins a small group of revolutionaries, to whom she gives her late grandmother's farm, an important gesture because the ownership of land is strongly associated with the privileged class. In the end, however, Clare can never find the place she seeks because Jamaican society cannot accept the light-skinned woman's embrace of her black heritage. Only in death does she transcend the question of race: her bones and those of her ancestors will reveal nothing about their skin.

In *No Telephone to Heaven* Cliff addressed homophobia in Jamaica by including a queer character, Harry/Harriet, a man who wants to be a woman and who loves women. Cliff stated that she "wanted to portray a character who would be the most despised character in Jamaica and show how heroic he is." She added that "he really loves his people. He is there helping, yet if they knew what he really was, they would kill him." He has endured the horrors of the subjugated, including rape, and yet he has managed to achieve what Clare never could, creating and claiming his own identity. Cliff called him "the most complete character in the book."

Cliff's third novel, *Free Enterprise* (1993), is a fictionalized tale of the life of Mary Ellen Pleasant, an abolitionist who supported John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry. The novel emphasizes the role of women who acted courageously to oppose the slave trade.

In her latest book, *The Store of a Million Items* (1998), Cliff returns to the format of short stories. Reviewer Lisa S. Nussbaum commented that they "read very nearly like parables without being preachy or moralistic in tone" and that "Cliff reaffirms the basic human dignity of each of her characters as she celebrates their fierce independence."

Cliff has taught literature and creative writing at a number of colleges, including the New School for Social Research, Stanford University, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and the University of California at Santa Cruz. She is a frequent contributor to many publications, including *Ms.* and *The Village Voice*, and often lectures on the subjects of racial and heterosexist prejudice.

Cliff and Rich make their home in Santa Cruz, California.

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.