



Michelle Cliff

Biography

Writer Michelle Cliff was born in Jamaica on November 2, 1946, at a time when her homeland was still a British colony. As a light-skinned Creole, a lesbian and a Jamaican who has “experienced colonialism as a force first-hand” (Gale Group 4), Cliff has a multiplicity of cultural and ethnic affiliations. She traces her Creole heritage to ancestors who were a mix of both “English” and “Slave” (Zachriah, et al. 2). Because of her multi-racial genealogy, Cliff is able to investigate and criticize oppression from a diversity of perspectives. Her work explores the intersectionality of oppression, especially as it pertains to history. Cliff ambitiously writes to salvage histories that have either been suppressed or erased by imperialism. Her “re-visioning” (Clawson 1) of history through fiction is an attempt to see history through the eyes of silenced people.

Cliff’s interest in history can be traced throughout her education in Jamaica, the United States and England. She and her family lived in Jamaica for the first three years of Cliff’s life, and then moved to a Caribbean neighborhood in New York, where they lived in the late forties and fifties. She moved frequently between Jamaica and the United States until she returned to Jamaica to attend school in the late fifties at the age of ten (Clawson 2). She received her Bachelor’s Degree from Wagner College in 1969 and a Masters in Philosophy in 1974, and completed her dissertation on the Italian Renaissance at the Warburg Institute in London. After graduating, she worked in publishing and teaching. It wasn’t until she was in her late thirties that she began to write. An article misrepresenting Jamaica inspired her to publish a corrective response. Cliff says she started writing “because I had something to say about the place I come out of” (Clawson 4).



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1946
- * Lived in Jamaica, the United States, and England
- * Writes fiction, non-fiction, and poetry

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In addition to writing about her place of origin, Cliff deals with the complexity of emotions stemming from experiences with racial inequality and homophobia. Her first book is a collection of prose poetry entitled *Claiming the Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (1980). In this collection, Cliff “focuses on the interracial prejudice, delineating how it feels to be urged to pass for white by one’s own family members, acknowledging an awareness of both the advantages gained by being light-skinned in a colorist society and the ways in which light-skinned blacks are taught to collaborate with the masters to keep that dark-skinned down” (Gale Group 3). Cliff’s other works address the conflicts that many of her characters experience because of skin tone. Her major characters are often split between two worlds: worlds in which they are privileged because of the lightness of their skin, and worlds in which they are not entirely accepted because of their mixed heritages.

In her first novel, *Abeng* (1984), the main character, Clare Savage, experiences a rise in consciousness as she recognizes how her lighter skin tone affects her relationships with people of darker skin tones. Clare’s parents are both light and dark and their allegiances are so antagonistic that their marriage is almost implausible. Clare’s mother, Kitty Savage, is descended from early Jamaican resisters known as the Maroons. Kitty is enamored with blackness, and she cherishes her people. Boy Savage, in contrast, is a proud descendent of Judge Savage, a slave owner known for his extreme brutality. As the lighter skinned daughter of disharmonious parents, Clare tries to identify her place in the colorist hierarchy of Jamaica. Clare’s personal history is intertwined with the mythology of Nanny, a legendary Maroon and enchantress, “who could catch a bullet between her buttocks and render the bullet harmless”(14). By intertwining these two stories, Cliff creates a historical narrative that connects Jamaica’s complicated and painful past with Clare’s internal struggle to reconcile two sides of herself.

Abeng’s main character, Clare, returns in Cliff’s second novel, *No Telephone To Heaven* (1987), as a young woman who has achieved a greater sense of the racial inequities in Jamaica, the United States and England. In this book, Clare claims the history and the identity of her maternal heritage by returning to Jamaica to enact social change. Clare’s interest in reclaiming the African part of her demonstrates an attempt to become complete. It also reflects Cliff’s own ambition to write an unabridged literary history for her homeland.



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Cliff writes, “To write a complete Caribbean woman, or man for that matter, demands of us retracing the African past of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the canefields, or gone to bush, or trapped in a class system notable for its rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification. Or a past bleached from our minds. It means finding the art forms of those of our ancestors and speaking in the patois forbidden us. It means realizing our knowledge will always be wanting. It means also, I think, mixing in the forms taught us by the oppressor, undermining his language and co-opting his style and turning it to our purpose.”

No Telephone to Heaven is more violent than *Abeng* and more urgent in its criticism of the devastation caused by colonialism. While a critique of colonialism is a major theme of Cliff’s works, the issue of skin tone is also ever-present in her first two novels. The sub-plot of *No Telephone To Heaven* involves Christopher, an underprivileged laborer, who kills a wealthy light skinned Jamaican family. Christopher, who is darker skinned, never interacts with Clare. Their only connection is Paul, the son of Christopher’s former employer and Clare’s one time lover. The disconnect between Christopher and Clare is symbolic of the lack of interaction between races and classes in Jamaica.

Cliff’s most recent novel, *Free Enterprise* (1993), is a historical piece that explores the untold story of the woman behind John Brown’s Raid on Harper’s Ferry. The novel’s main character, Mary Ellen Pleasant, is a relative unknown in American history. Mary Ellen Pleasant, or M.E.P. , is the author of a mysterious note found on the body of John Brown. The note read, “The axe is laid at the foot of the tree. When the first blow is struck there will be more money to help’ M.E.P.” (Jacket). This message was never traced back to its author and is only a blip on the official record of the Harper’s Ferry incident. With this note and other historical clues, Cliff’s book imagines a web of African American resistance surrounding the raid on Harper’s Ferry. While “re-visioning” the history of resistance activist Mary Ellen Pleasant, Cliff also includes historical narratives from other people from colonized nations, thus creating a global network of oppressed, yet resisting, peoples. These different characters are all engaged in an under-represented movement to re-live and recover their histories through stories handed down through generations. By including these stories, Cliff asserts the importance of cultural “mythology” in “re-visioning” the histories of colonized people beyond Eurocentric interpretations.



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In addition to her novels, Cliff has three books of collected works: *The Land of Look Behind: Prose and Poetry* (1985), *Bodies of Water* (1990), and her most recent collection, *The Store of a Million Items: Stories* (1998). In addition to writing fiction, Cliff is a prolific essayist with works published in a variety of anthologies. Cliff is the recipient of two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1982 and 1989), and has also received fellowships from MacDowell College (1982) and the Massachusetts Artists Foundation (1984). Cliff was also an Eli Kantor fellow at Yaddo in 1984.

Cliff's ability to imaginatively recreate the disturbing images of the past has earned her critical acclaim. While Cliff's writing is an important and valuable addition to criticism of the bloody past of the Americas, it is not intended for those unwilling to recognize their own place in the racist, patriarchal and homophobic structures responsible for contemporary hegemony. Cliff often implicates her own heroines for their unwitting participation in racist, classist, and sexist systems. Her writing is a process of coming to terms with and overcoming these internal prejudices, so that the oppressive systems that continue today can someday be dismantled.

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