

The Embassy of Cambodia

An artful piece that manages to reveal a large voice in a small story

By Jas Ghuman

Zadie Smith's short novella appeared on shelves in 2013, after first being published as a short story in *The New Yorker*. The story follows the life of a young black woman, Fatou, and the hardship she faces in her everyday life. Employed by a wealthy family with three children, Fatou serves as a maid and cleaner. The Embassy of Cambodia is actually where a game of badminton takes place, next to the much less impressive Health Centre. Throughout the story, the game is constantly referenced by use of the shuttlecock, which Smith presents with the phrase, 'Pock, smash. Pock, smash', a clever literary tactic as it allows the reader to see the rhythmic sound of the shuttlecock as a huge contrast to Fatou's life, which involves no regularity or predictability.

Smith manages to capture the true hardships of migrants in London.

It is implied that Fatou herself is an illegal immigrant, but Smith decides not to clarify whether or not this is actually the case. The lack of voice in Smith's story is artfully produced. Fatou is a slave, and is given no right to speak her true thoughts. However, very interestingly, Fatou does not associate herself with being a slave:

"It was not for the first time that Fatou had wondered if she herself was a slave, but this story, brief as it was, confirmed in her mind that she was not."

Fatou believes she is not a slave, as it was her own father that took her away from her home, not a kidnapper. Furthermore, she admits that she can read English and Italian, and that the family employing her had given her an Oyster card (used to give London citizens access to travel on the London Underground), which allowed her to explore outside of the house. Fatou's denial to the fact that she is a slave is a clever device used by Smith.

Rather than allowing the character of Fatou to appear meek and in denial, her defiance against her status shows her determination to speak out.

We see that Fatou goes swimming at the health centre with her friend, Andrew. This is an act clearly deemed unacceptable by the reaction of the woman at the front desk, and the family's decision to fire her. However, Fatou goes anyway. Later, when she is fired by Mrs Derawal, she shows no emotional reaction and devises a plan immediately. It is as though she is merely expectant of unfair and unjustified behaviour by those around her. She finds help from Andrew and is given her passport, which indicates her freedom. Smith manages to create a character who has known only hardship and suffering, and shows her to be incredibly resilient and determined. Her romantic interest in Andrew is another small form of rebellion, something looked down upon but merely showing the true presence of an emotional being.

Finally, Smith's short novel shows the typical class struggle in London during 1987-1999: whilst Fatou is struggling as a migrant and black woman, she sees the elite presence of the Embassy and her

employment family. Whilst struggling as one of the 'working class', she also has to serve those above her. In this sense, Smith provides an interesting take on the lives of the unprivileged by having a low class member of society engaging with the privileged people whom she must be a slave for.

RRP: £7.99

ISBN: 9780241146521

To summarise, Zadie Smith offers a hidden voice to her characters, and in return we see a small spark of rebellion against those who attempt to silence them.

Penguin Publishing, 2013