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Books

Saw the House in Half

A novel by Oliver Jackman
Howard University Press,
Washington, D. C., 1974
337 pp., \$7.95
Reviewed by Genevieve Ekaete

Saw the House in Half, by Oliver Jackman can appropriately be called *Divide the House (Blacks) in Three, or More*. It is the story of the physical and psychic journeys of Blacks. Specifically, the journeys of Blacks in England; Blacks in Africa; Blacks in the Caribbean.

The novel unfolds with the arrival of Sinclair Brathwaite in England from the island of Barbados, then a British colony. During the course of his studying at Cambridge University, he associates closely with other West Indians, sharing their common pressures from a list of enemies. "The Enemy," as some of them have determined, "was the weather, that much chronicled and romanticized weather, the weather of Wordsworth, of Sherlock Holmes, of Dickens, that turned out . . . to be a vicious, all-pervading, anti-West-Indian agency.

"But the Enemy was above all the great juggernaut mass of white humanity that surrounded you every day, everywhere, that smiled at you and put you in the wrong. That sent his women to tempt you into confusion and softening of the heart, and, in the very schools through which you hoped you might acquire enough of his skills to give you a chance to win your emancipation, insidiously pumped into you a venomous skepticism about emancipation itself; so that like a man responding to a posthypnotic suggestion you found yourself asking yourself in unguarded moments, what *is* this emancipation? Isn't the world all one? Good God in Heaven above, what an effort to keep up your guard!"

Then there is the story told to Brathwaite about the professor of speech and deportment at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art who preferred "big-assed Jamaican men" to his "slim-shanked Scottish spouse." The professor invited a Jamaican student over to his house to spend a weekend making love to him and his wife. (Only, in the invitation, he wasn't that explicit.) The student went, made love (for want of a more appropriate word) to the professor's wife, all the while turning a deaf ear to the pleas of the husband who wanted a part of the action.

A few weeks later, the student overheard the professor at a party saying that all the West Indians and Africans in the school ought to concentrate on "dance, not drama. 'Drama calls for too much subtlety. *Their forte is movement. They're so utterly animal!*'"

What to do with his own countryman, Dacosta Payne? Payne, his first acquaintance in England and a "Management Consultant" (fancy title for con-man and big-time hustler)—who says "I'm Barbadian. Originally." Brathwaite knows for a fact that he is impressed, at first, by the "liquid, drawling vowels" of Payne's upper-class English which goes well with his mode of dressing—the slightly false note of his "aggressively 'African'" hair notwithstanding. Brathwaite enjoys dining with Payne at X Club, a club Payne says he could never afford to go when he was Black. "Being with Dacosta Payne, I, too, was not Black," Brathwaite feels.

Five years after his arrival in England, five years of smarting in his "hypersensitive soul from the slings and arrows of racial contempt in the white man's country," Sinclair Brathwaite is ready for a change. He also has "a growing uncertainty about the concept that the highest form attainable by the Black human being

was that of the Black Englishman." Moreover, he wants "to experience existence in the place where most of (his) forefathers experienced their existence."

He chooses Nigeria, then under British rule. No sooner does he arrive there than a Trinidadian warns him that living in that country is no picnic. "When the white man ain't jumping in your skin, it's the African. I don't know which one is the worst."

Brathwaite works as a writer for a British-owned English-language newspaper, and falls in love with Tola, a writer for a competing newspaper who is the epitome of the new, sophisticated, Western-educated, and "almost" totally liberated African woman. Theirs is a glorious love affair.

This is where the insightful novelist, Oliver Jackman, marvelously employs—with maximum effect—his journalistic and humanistic skill at portraying a culture at once foreign and familiar. Jackman comes to the task with no mean qualification, having been Ambassador to the United Nations for Barbados, correspondent for the British Broadcasting Corporation and some Nigerian newspapers. In addition to interpreting correctly subtle cultural differences between Blacks and other Blacks, he delves into the little known fact that we humans are as much language-bound as we are culture-bound.

Though Tola, at the height of their romance, elicits several "I love you" from Brathwaite and professes her love for him, she warns him, nevertheless, that: "There isn't a word for 'love' in Yoruba . . . The word we use means 'want.' People like me who live between two languages, we have a made-up word we have to press into service. 'Fe-fe.' 'Want-want.' You know what that means: I can only love in English."

36 Tola has long deserted her legal husband and a divorce is imminent. She thinks nothing of marriage, and during the course of rebuking Brathwaite for suggesting they get married someday, declares: "People should get married only when there was *nothing else left for them to do*," and says they have time and scope which they haven't begun to use yet. Yet, the same Tola is to leave Brathwaite for a Yoruba man. Matilda, her surrogate mother, explains why this is unavoidable. Tola, like Matilda, is an *omole*, a home child. A home child always returns home. "It is something in the heart that does not change." So Tola, "has to" leave her West Indian boyfriend whom she loves (though in English) and is happy with, for a Nigerian she probably does not love, just as Matilda, herself too, an *omole*, had run away from her Danish lover 40 years earlier. This leaves estranged lover Brathwaite to muse: Shouldn't the appropriate Yoruba society "design a special mark to be placed—say, on the inside of the thigh—on all *omoles* so that unwary Danes and West Indians may avoid pointless entanglement? Especially West Indians. It would be a service to all the Black peoples of the world."

Quite frequently, in this novel, some characters are moved to see the larger picture of their oppression, and in terms of Black and white. On the most elementary level, Funke, an illiterate prostitute, tells a British official in Nigeria that she has no sympathy for white men, because "Your tribe is too powerful."

On a higher philosophical level, Dacosta Payne (now in Nigeria), still hustling, but no longer a Black Englishman, reflects deeply when a white man points his forefinger at Payne's midriff: "How many white forefingers have been poked at the shorts of how many Black men in

America, in the West Indies, in Africa? Was that to be the eternal symbol of Black-white relationships till the end of time? Would it never be possible for some Black hand some day to take firm hold of that white index and carefully twist it out of socket, disabling it for at least as long as it took the Black man to get up off his knees?"

One of the splendid ironies of this novel, is that Adu, the very man who pries Tola loose from a Black "foreigner" for himself, has the greatest potential for helping to unite Blacks—both native and foreign. Once the political theorist who coined such catchy phrases like "If the bloody imperialists will not depart peaceably, they will be driven out bloodily," Adu is to become a pragmatic political force to contend with. When he sees Dacosta Payne in trouble with both British and Nigerian officials, Adu agonizes because Payne is "specifically, Black, beleaguered by white institutions in a country where he ought to have been able to feel reasonably secure from that particular species of harassment."

For someone who has never been a slave, the word "plantation," curiously raises in Adu's mind "a subliminal cloud of atavistic images of white men lovingly transporting exotic plants to virgin lands, and brutally transplanting in their wake the millions of human beings, *Black human beings*, they thought they needed to make the plants flourish and prosper for the greater glory of the white world."

But the story goes on. Or should one say, ends. Sinclair Brathwaite, assured that Tola "loves" him, though cannot be his, leaves Nigeria to take a job in Trinidad, an island in which he has never lived. Trinidad is hardly "home." But then, where is?

There is no denouement here. In Trinidad, Brathwaite finds "people were

forever asking each other, urgently, pantingly, 'What's new?' And when they weren't asking they were searching. The newest thing was identity, and you could see beavies of searchers everywhere, heads down, ears pricked up, at street corners, in the pick up taxis . . . at cocktail parties . . . in the bar . . . even in Parliament." So, in the end, as in the beginning, the search is still on. The identity being sought cannot be found because it does not *yet* exist.

Oliver Jackman has written the best kind of novel—one based on real life. Much has been written about Blacks in Africa, Blacks in America, Blacks in England and in the Caribbean. But Jackman breaks new ground by writing effectively about all in one book. In that sense, *Saw the House in Half* is a classic. □

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