# The Colonial Order Upside Down: "Darkest England" (1996)

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**Abstract**

Nineteenth-century British explorers are satirized in this reverse travelogue by South African novelist Christopher Hope. This article analyzes the novel, *Darkest England,* which turns colonialism inside out, sending a Bushman on a mission to the Queen of England - a hazardous journey indeed among the pugnacious, uncivilized muggles in that sodden land. The story, set in 1993, is narrated in the unexcitable tradition of 19th-century-explorer narratives by David Mungo Booi selected by his people to visit the Queen (Booi is the only one with a knowledge of English) to remind her of her grandmother Victoria's pledge to protect them from harm. The aim of this article is to analyze the relationship between two cultures, dominant and oppressed one in Swiftian satire manner on how members of these cultures view one another and how visitors to the metropole are treated in often quite horrifying, laughable, embarrassing and ultimately eye-opening way. The article suggests that both those who used to be oppressors and those who suffered must learn to get to know one another and find some *modus vivendi* in new circumstances observing heart more than reason.

**Keywords:** Colonial, postcolonial, other, satire, identity.

## Introduction

With a lot of humor and storytelling flair, the British writer of South African origin, Christopher Hope, in the novel *Darkest England* (1996) probes all the stereotypes created about themselves and others by the representatives of the dominant discourse, in this case the colonial British. Hope constantly returns to Africa through persistent travels across its fascinating regions and through the themes of his novels, stories and nonfiction pieces. Christopher Hope is an extremely skilled creator of penetrating satire. Thanks to his South African background and the new themes and views he brought to British literature, Hope

offers a new, fresher perspective to critical and artistic judgment on major religious, political and cultural issues.

The novel's protagonist, the Bushman, David Mungo Bui, explores an often conceited nation that, although it has lost its empire, has not lost its imperial arrogance and self-assurance. The only thing Bui knew about "the remote and treacherous reaches of darkest England" (Hope, 1996, 186) before setting out and which should have been of great use to him was what he had heard from his master Burr Smith. These details concerned the glorious English history of which the English are so elevated and the almost failed endeavours to civilize the first inhabitants of the island. The first people who sailed to England from countries across the sea, the Bikers, "they failed in their heartfelt attempt to civilize the aboriginals and died in despair…" (Hope, 1996, 9), and when the Romans came "… they wept to see the foolishness of the natives, who shared wives among ten or twelve men, worshipped the moon, oaks and mistletoe, and measured out their lives in fortnights. To this day, said my master, the English have great difficulty in thingking in periods longer than fourteen days. If asked to think a few months into the future, they grow confused and resentful. If asked to think a year or two ahead, they grow mute and wan and retire to their beds or their alehouses" (Hope, 1996, 9).

From the very beginning Hope purposefully contorts the familiar image that the English have of themselves – England as the cradle of civilization that brought light and enlightenment to all corners of the world. As an agent of The Society for the Advancement of the Discovery of the Interior of England, David Mungo Bui hoards information about the climate, terrain and customs of the people before the field trip and, of course, like any explorer, he encounters prejudices typical of English expeditions from the time of empire. Bui needs to find out if it is true "It was said, for example, that the English feasted on babies at special times of the year. Was it true?, do they have a special attachment to brass, mirrors, chalice" and is it, as the only one of their people who visited England asserts, "a savage who waged constant war against his neighbors and often fell out among themselves" (Hope, 1996, 14-15). He was also warned that the tribes along the River Thames lived in caves that a person could not measure, "...down to the sunless sea" (Hope, 1996, 15 ) and that "...the rain is in love with England... " (Hope, 1996, 22). However, the main goal of his expedition is to remind the Queen of England of the promise of her predecessor and send help to his people who are on the verge of annihilation. In vain some "worldly" people reminded him that "the word of white men, in his opinion, was worth nothing more than sheep's shit" (Hope, 1996, 16) and that this paper had caused all the trouble in their country and divested the Boers of their rights. by birth, Bui, like a true honest explorer, adhered to the Great Queen's Paper Promise, and also made a promise to his people that he would accurately describe what he saw among the English, without any prejudice, however dark it was.

As soon as he landed at the London airport he began to get acquainted with all the peculiarities of his "hosts". He admitted that he had not seen so many planes since the last hunting season "…when farmers from across the Cape descended on the Karoo for the annual springbuck hunt, landing like flocks of

Egyptian geese on the gravel strip beside the Lutherburg municipal shooting range" (Hope, 1996, 25). Alluding to the English often excessive fondness for animals, especially dogs, Hope describes her narrator's astonishment at the many settlements around the airport and excuses the English for preferring their people to braves airport noise rather than their pets. Because of this, Bui solemnly declares that "...David Mungo Booi would rather be an Englishman's dog than a Boer's best friend!" (Hope, 1996, 26).

He realized that he would receive special treatment when he was directed to a long line at the airport with all the colored passengers, but also when, instantly after the document review, the only document that Bui had with him was a parchment with the seal of Queen Victoria or as it was known to the Bushmen as the "The old She-Elephant", they were solemnly handed over to the "official welcome" or "officials of the crown dedicated to keeping the queen's peace". Not being aware that in England he will first be introduced to an English prison, Bui contemplates the royal customs and promises they made in the colonies, dominions, realms and protectorates, but without the intention of allowing their distant children come to visit them one day. It seems quite right that Hope's narrator concludes that "in ancient English Royal Tradition, one might visit others, but others did not visit one" (Hope, 2008, 50).

However, it seems that even the most pessimistic English could not guess how many distant "relatives" would not only come to visit but also stay in their country. When David Mungo Bui also becomes one of those "distant relatives" who comes by "Royal Invitation" it will not be long before he sees that his hosts, in their praactical way, have divided the world into "Them" and "Us" making so a rough the distinction between natives and foreigners: "all foreigners are regarded as avoidance partners; all related natives are held to be joking partners, or kith and kin" (Hope, 1996, 72). Likewise, Bui is fascinated by the English creativity in inventing new and better nicknames for settlers: "curry-munchers", "Spearmen", "Paki". Only an "imaginative race"as Bui calls the English can have the gift for such a thing, and at the same time they are not ashamed or worried that they are not even able to pronounce their names. It is clear that this criticism is directed toward the account of the still deeply divided English society, despite all the ubiquitous and loud emphasis of the authorities on equality and multiculturalism.

Hope could not avoid another idiosyncrasy of the islanders, which is the widely famous English sense of humor, which according to them surpasses the humor of all other nations because they like to make fun of themselves the most. Although charmed by the supposed superiority of the English, our "researcher" Bui cannot help but notice that the situation in reality is somewhat more complicated. The English laugh at themselves when they pretend to be other people, and the object of ridicule is usually physical defects or profanity. Listening to English jokes, it is crystal clear to Bui that "The English do indeed like laughing at themselves, but only because they hate others doing so" (Hope, 1996, 39).

**A Profound Critique of Modern English Society Wrapped in Hope's Satire**

As time passed and Bui became better acquainted with the customs and mentality of the English, his idealistic image at the beginning of the trip also darkened. An excessively narrow world view graced these people, their concepts of the world had shrunk like a leather cloak left out in the rain, and Bui really blamed the rain that fell almost every day during his stay at the "Royal Guest House" or, more simply, in prison. They will think that the excessive humidity may have affected their sense of distance, so that they thought of their island as very large, and often remembered wistfully the part they once played in the world. The writer is doubtless ridiculing the chief pride of English history—the English colonial glory which, though long since ended, still always entitles the English nation to occasionally feel superior. Bui is amazed at the number of soldiers the English keep even though they supposedly gave up fighting, all for the purpose of doing good deeds. The description of the torture of enemy prisoners was used by Hope as a contrast to the ubiquitous and overemphasized English love and nobility for animals and plants that apparently did not include humans.

English hypocrisy and shallowness, visible most clearly in their media, is shown in the novel on the example of the girl Alma wounded in a brutal war in some distant city. Although children in that same war were dying every day, Alma was chosen to show all the greatness, compassion and goodness of the English nation. Little Alma was not chosen by chance because the appearance of the victim was of great importance. "Plainer children were increasingly unpopular. The cry went out for the pretty ones" (Hope, 1996, 56). Our hero shrewdly observes, it seems already common, the English way of showing compassion for the suffering of others "Focusing only on one victim, not wasting one's compassion dozens of those who cannot be helped at all". Hope, certainly not by chance, deepens the case of little Alma by adding a military-political aspect to the story. As the press and political leaders on all sides agreed that something had to be done, the question arose as to whether military aid should be offered to help little Alma. And that is when the English media gets heated - a fierce debate is created, as this country is known for, some are for it, others are against it. The argument ends thanks to the English genius for compromises: almost everyone agreed, namely that children probably had as much right to national compassion as did suffering animals.

Bui absorbed by his friend Beth and her father that hypocrisy is not only a companion of issues of social and national importance, but also of everyday situations and not so important conversations. Quite wholeheartedly and in order to survive in his new environment, he was advised to use the favorite English postman's words "by the way" or "would you mind if...? " "Frankly speaking" is a must if you want to say something honestly without misunderstanding your intention. In this way, the English, according to Betty, convince listeners that they are not making any kind of emotional commitment to honesty or brevity, but are simply using the rules of conversation. Following the instructions closely, Bui realizes that the importance of being nice is something he still had a lot to learn about. He learned how much the average Englishman "respects" foreigners

by using a series of polite phrases from his second teacher - Bishop Ferbrader. By varying the phrases – "Being abroad makes me ill; Oh, really?; It's just a German racket; No, no, no, no! It's just not on; and Personally, I blame the French" (Hope, 1996, 230). Bui quite naturally fit into the environment and passed easily among all classes of English society. It was this training that helped him save himself from enraged MPs and ministers from the "Great Place beside the river", i.e. the English Parliament. The debate in the parliament concerned the increasing number of settlers who exceeded the number of the native population in certain cities. The latest danger came in the form of Bushmen or San nomads from South Africa or in the language of the ministers "The same vagabonds who had sorely troubled Her Majesty's forces during their late occupation of the Cape of Good Hope?" (Hope, 1996, 238). There was mirth in the House and all the Members jumped to their feet indignant at sharing their island home with bogus asylum seekers and all sorts of ganged up strangers. The agitated crowd reminded Bui of the sport fans he met on the train to London and he justifiably concluded that "the Members on the green benches were but the parliamentary faces of the gangs on the train" (Hope, 1996, 239). This episode ends in an unquestionably comic way: he is saved from being lynched by parliamentarians by his previous training. He got safely out of the menacing crowd by telling them in a pleasant tone that he personally blamed everything on the French.

Hope does not forget some of the urgent problems of contemporary English society: juvenile delinquency, adolescent pregnancies, the breakdown of marriage and the traditional family, as well as complete alienation. His narrator will adroitly observe that, based on what he has seen, the average citizen is in serious danger of being killed in the street by armed children. With this, the writer draws attention to a huge social problem in England - violence among young people, crimes on the rise and street confrontations that usually end with knives being drawn. Our guide through the novel will be amazed by such events in a highly developed country where the Queen loved her people and her servants, the soldiers and the police, were on the side of the people.

Alienation and isolation as inevitable problems of modern societies in England are masked by overemphasized respect and protection of privacy. When old Jed is found lying dead in his house for days, Bui cannot help but wonder that persons could die alone among their neighbors. Bui knew that for Englishpersons their houses were their castles, but were they also their graves? Bui will do his best to understand why old Jed's neighbors did not interfere with his right to privacy during his lifetime, but he will never understand why it drives them to such extremes and carelessness that the neighbor dies alone and abandoned.

That not everything is so black in this strange country, David Mungo Bui was convinced by the example of the state social assistance program thanks to which the unemployed received money and housing, but not only the unemployed and the sick. They received help also because they have children and even when they feel well. Here too, Hope will mock the far-famed English concern for citizens, which his narrator will compare to the pensions that are paid

in his country only to old people who have worked all their lives. Apparently the English idea is much more advanced, because pensions are given to those who are still young enough to enjoy them.

Observing male-female relations on the island, African Bui notices enviable differences in marriage customs compared to his culture where marriage precedes the conception of children. In England, according to him, one of the main rites of manhood was for young men to fertilize as many women as early as possible. The sequel is already familiar and expected to the reader, but completely incomprehensible to Bushman "They then declined all further responsibility, and decamped to some other place, there to continue the tradition, often with violence" (Hope, 1996, 108).

How complex is the relationship between men and women, and often between men and men, Bui learned from the former bishop Ferbrader. The first surprise that both confused and amused him was the information that a native English male loves his own sex immensely and that one less known danger of traveling among the English is their impulsive desire to fornicate with strangers. It is for this reason that Bui advises his San people to travel with their limbs well covered at all times. The reader will certainly see through Hope's intention to point out that the English nation is one of the leaders in the world in terms of the number of gay population. The bishop of course also has a "scientific" explanation for the wave of hatred against women of all ages that has swept the country. As the English often stayed abroad, they exercised their cruder pleasures there. The problem arose when the empire disintegrated and men were deprived of their traditional rights to oversee their possessions abroad. This turned them to domestic sources, but the kind of animalistic good humor that was in place "across the pond" proved disastrous at home. Getting drunk and attacking a passer-by was not a good look in England as it was in the Land of the Sun, and because of this, otherwise decent Englishmen now quite openly hated women. In this banter, Hope skillfully plays with the stereotype of English same-sex love, but also with the loss of imperial power that the former colonizers never fully got over. Hope's narrator loudly notes that nothing nourishes the English more than the knowledge that once upon a time they lived better than anyone on earth, and the memory of those days is a comfort of almost religious significance.

Towards the end of his journey, Bui will admit that the English know very little about their own culture and geography, and that they are more confused about their own country than the travelers who are the most ignorant. Deep-rooted taboos and fears characteristic of this "a very little country, more badly traumatized by loss of empire and loss of earnings than they are willing, or even able, to admit" (Hope, 2008, 229) live in this ignorance. This seems to be another of Hope's merciless attacks on both the English education system and the glorious colonial past.

Our narrator went through a lot before reaching his goal - the Queen's Palace. He endured the most difficult trials: on his arrival he was detained at Her Majesty's Pleasure, more precisely in prison; he was let fall on his head but luckily he was saved by a flying Bishop; he was attacked in the Mother of all Parliaments; he was captured by the Lord of Goodlove Castle , and women

performed experiments. In addition to all that, he was also locked up in an insane asylum and was attacked by football fans. However, it was only at the end that disappointment awaited him. He stepped into the Royal Chambers thanks to the coins he had in his pocket – and the Queen herself is an ordinary and easily accessible tourist attraction. He also managed to talk to her, and only then will he have the right to curbs the dream he has been dreaming all his life. “I saw before me an elderly lady in a headscarf, peering uncertainly at the world through a pair of thick spectacles, sipping a mug of cooling tea... ” (Hope, 1996, 267). When he is in the dark of his quiet, darkened of the castle, because electricity is simply too expensive, brought up the problems the lady faced every day - the huge expenses that drove her into a deep depression, the attacks on her family, the ill-advised marriages and eccentric occupations of her children and relatives - Bui, in his persistently limited way, understood that the English people treat their ruler badly and that is why he, as the appointed representative of the Red Nation, unofficially offers her refuge and asylum in his country. The reader naturally understands the writer's message - the Queen is just a mannequin of old glory, a symbol of an institution that no one takes seriously anymore.

Hope's hero Bui, with all his naivety and honesty, was trying to teach these weirdos what happiness is. He transformed his friend Beth from a shy, troubled woman to a radiant beauty who showed her breasts to the world the way God intended. She rejected, it is true for a short time, all the comforts of civilization and went to Bui’s blue tent erected by the hedge in an English garden in the country. She admitted to her father that she was finally free, and Boy David, as the English called him, noticed something on her face that he had never seen before: she was happy. How much Beth really enjoyed her new role, and how much it was for her a short-lived show of exoticism and strangeness, for which the English have a special fondness, is for the reading public to judge.

## Conclusion

The satirical effect of the novel *Darkest England* is achieved, in Lars Eckstein's opinion, thanks to the fact that the author continuously alludes to a large number of earlier texts, above all to those on which David Mungo Bui grew up (Eckstein, 2007, 148). Bui's expedition in England is an obvious *replica* of British research in Africa. He plans to hire several “British natives” to carry his bags or be guides through the interior of the country in search of suitable land for his people. Also, he did not forget to bring various beads and trinkets with which he would win over the British Queen when he finally met her.

Hope informs us in the preface that his hero has undoubtedly read Livingstone's Missionary Travels and Stanley's In Darkest Africa, as well as the diaries of his namesake, Mungo Park, and even Conrad's “Heart of Darkness”. By imitating these works both in style and content, and especially in the eurocentric attitude that has now been transformed into an Afrocentric one that judges English culture strictly from a Bushman point of view, Hope makes the writings of the aforesaid English scholars an object of derision and thereby undermines English culture. colonial tradition and question the viability of British ideas of cultural exclusivity and superiority.

From the beginning of his journey, Boy David did his best to convince the English that the brain is not the center of intelligence and that it only causes headaches. He tried to teach them, who have always been known for their coolness and restraint, that the intelligent life of the heart is the key to distinguishing good from evil. "I had to tell him at this point that the brain is not the seat of intelligence. It simply gives you a headache. It is the intelligent life of the heart that teaches us to know good from evil" (Hope, 1996, 41). Unfortunately, his noble mission did not have much success because he encountered people who, as he says, lived in delusions, completely insensitive to reason. Towards the end of the novel, Hope's painfully honest traveler and explorer, Bushman David Mungo Bui, draws one of the final conclusions about the hypocrisy and arrogance of these "great people":

"They, who by any measure may be said to lead lives of poverty, sadness, fear and restriction on an overcrowded island, sometimes never seeing the sun from one week to the next, at the mercy of increasingly savage youth who would tear their parents limb for a sixpence, and frequently do so, marooned at the mercy of clever and more powerful neighbors, enduring in the twilight of their past glories and fearful of the future, still contrived somehow to believe themselves the happiest people on earth and their system the best that the sons of man ever invented!" (Hope, 1996, 215-216).

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