An Endless Game

Neocolonial Injustice in Zadie Smith’s The Embassy of Cambodia¹

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The existence of slavery in our times is an undeniable yet often ignored fact. Zadie Smith’s novella The Embassy of Cambodia tells the story of Fatou, an immigrant from Ivory Coast who works in conditions which are quite close to those of slavery in the house of the Derawals, a wealthy Arab family. The story centres geographically on the Cambodian embassy in Willesden, the area in North London that is the setting for many of Smith’s narratives.² The narrative describes how Fatou observes, with a certain fascination, a game of badminton “between two unseen players”³ inside the Embassy, a game which seems not to stop and is referred throughout the story in allusions to the repeated movement of the shuttlecock: “Pock. Smash.” The game of badminton, as well as the building itself, had already attracted the attention of some of the neighbours in Willesden. In fact, the novella makes both the game and the embassy central to Fatou’s story as a migrant and ‘slave’ in contemporary London. The appearance of the Embassy also forces the neighbours in Willesden to confront Cambodia’s traumatic past and leads to the discussion of genocides in the last century – the Holocaust, Rwanda, Hiroshima, and, pre-eminently, Cambodia. Cambodia’s history of genocide was once described as a “political game” in which “victims of the Khmer Rouge genocide [...] were on

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² A daring aspect of this fiction’s intersection with reality is the fact that there actually is a ‘Royal Embassy of Cambodia to the United Kingdom’ in Willesden Green (64 Brondesbury Park).
the wrong side.” Many parallels could be drawn between Smith’s novella and the history of Cambodia, such as the dehumanization of its victims, the abandoning of its peoples, the importance of class and race, and the attempt to homogenize its minorities.

Despite the undeniable influence of genocide studies on The Embassy of Cambodia, this essay will focus on the reflection of modern-day slavery in the novella and on discussing the still visible consequences of colonialism. My purpose is to provide a close reading of the novella and to connect it with the cases of slavery revealed in England in recent years. At the same time, I will be paying attention to some of the most important problems that these cases of slavery bring to the fore: the witnessing of a mostly clandestine activity and the bearing of individual and collective responsibility. Thus, I hope to show how the novella exposes the injustices committed against those subjects who remain enslaved by neo-colonial practices, and how it appeals for more conscious acts of witnessing that may lead to action and justice.

The Embassy of Cambodia recounts how its protagonist, Fatou, “read with interest a story about a Sudanese ‘slave’ living in a rich man’s house in London”: It was not the first time that Fatou had wondered if she herself was a slave, but this story, brief as it was, confirmed in her own mind that she was not” (15). The arguments that lead Fatou to this conclusion are: that she was not kidnapped, since it was her father who arranged her passage from Ivory Coast to Ghana, then to Libya and Italy; that she only has to endure minor occasional physical violence and verbal abuse at her employers’ house; that, although her passport and wages are retained and she sleeps in a room without space “for two people to stand” (64), she is not a prisoner, since she is told to do the shopping and she manages to escape secretly from the house on Monday mornings to go swimming at a nearby health centre, using stolen guest passes from her employers; and that she goes to church on Sundays. The fact that the story puts the word ‘slave’ in quotation marks may suggest that it does not apply in our times or that

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