

# A Poetic Protest for Peace: An Analysis of Benjamin Zephaniah's Poetry

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

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## **Declaration**

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

**Student's Full Name & Signature:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Pier Shihab', is written over a horizontal line.

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## Approval

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## **Abstract**

Benjamin Zephaniah's poetry is deeply conscious of questions of racism, social injustice, and violence. He writes against these and demands solidarity among people of different backgrounds. This study is a qualitative approach to a detailed analysis of Benjamin Zephaniah's poetry. His autobiography, *The Life and Rhymes of Benjamin Zephaniah* (2018), contextualises our understanding of his poetry with experiences drawn from his life as a British Caribbean poet. With ancestral roots in Jamaica and Barbados, Zephaniah's poetic language is unconventional and this is a reflection of his Caribbean heritage. His subject matter of poetry is the rights of marginalised people, of people who face ostracization as a result of their racial and ethnic identity, mainly in Britain. He points out the discrepancies of institutions such as the political parties and the police in Britain that he argues, promote violence. Some of his poems also speak for animal rights. The aim of Zephaniah's poetic revolution is to demand peace and unity in people regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds.

**Keywords:** Benjamin Zephaniah; racism; British authority; poetic revolution; unity; peace

## **Dedication**

My work is dedicated to all the people who read poetry from their hearts. I cordially thank them who love poetry, and take its taste instead of investigating it mechanically. Thanks! You

people kept poetry alive!

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to express my deep sense of gratitude to my supervisor Dr Mahruba T Mowtushi. She helped me throughout my writing with her guidance and feedback. She guided me whenever I was in any sort of confusion. Without her cordial support, it was impossible for me to complete this work.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Declaration.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Approval .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Dedication .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Acknowledgement .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>vii-viii</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>1-4</b>
<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review.....</b>	<b>5-8</b>
<b>Chapter 3 Contextualising Benjamin Zephaniah within British Caribbean Literature .....</b>	<b>9-15</b>
<b>Chapter 4 Emergence of Benjamin Zephaniah as a Poet .....</b>	<b>16-24</b>
4.1 Developmental Stage as a Poet.....	16-18
4.2 Significance and Meaning of Poetry .....	19-24
<b>Chapter 5 Poetic Revolution: A Rhythmic Voice of Protest .....</b>	<b>25-34</b>
5.1 Poetry against Domestic Violence .....	25-27
5.2 Anger at Racial Discrimination .....	27-30
5.3 Protest against Authority Figures and Social Institutions.....	30-34
<b>Chapter 6 Urge for Peace: “All People are People” .....</b>	<b>35-42</b>
6.1 Appeal for Unity .....	35-38
6.2 Empathy for Refugees in Britain .....	38-40

6.3 Sympathy for Animals .....	40-42
<b>Chapter 7 Conclusion .....</b>	<b>43-45</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>46-52</b>



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Edward W. Said comments in the essay “Reflection on Exile” (2000) that “EXILE IS STRANGELY compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (137).<sup>1</sup> Caribbean migrants in Britain and their descendants who were born in Britain faced identity crisis while in exile in Britain. Racism, the oscillating policy of the British government regarding immigrants and refugees, and economic disparity of migrant people were some common scenarios in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. Benjamin Zephaniah, a descendent of Caribbean migrant parents experienced the same feeling of exile and lack of direction while growing up in Britain. To express his anger against the authorities those promote xenophobia, Zephaniah uses a peaceful form of revolution—that is, a poetic revolution against injustice. Zephaniah wants to promote unity and peace among people regardless of their diverse backgrounds, and poetry is his tool with which he executes this.

Before looking at his works, we need a brief background information on Benjamin Zephaniah. Zephaniah is a contemporary poet who was born in Birmingham in 15 April 1958 to parents who migrated to England from Barbados and Jamaica. From his childhood, he experienced various kinds of racial discrimination by his neighbours, school fellows, and teachers. He was often misrecognised in schools as West Indian even though he corrected them that he was born in Birmingham, and therefore was a British citizen. From a young age, as a result of racial discrimination, Zephaniah grew up harbouring resentment and anger

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is included in Edward W. Said’s *Reflections on exile and other essays* (2000).

against “authority culture” (memoirs, chapter 2)<sup>2</sup> that divides people. As a child, he experienced discrimination at home and in the outside world which later led him to commit crimes. He was arrested several times and sent to borstal, a youth detention centre. However, Zephaniah longed to be a poet since his childhood but during his teenage this desire often fell apart. In a letter written by Bob Marley to Zephaniah wrote in 1970s, the former wrote, “Britain needs you, so forward on” (chapter 17). Zephaniah realized that, and his dream of being a “revolutionary poet” (ibid) was revitalized by this inspirational note from the legendary musician from Jamaica.

This is a qualitative study based on close reading of Benjamin Zephaniah’s poetry. Most of the poems of this study are from the collection titled *City Psalms* (1992).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, other poems and songs are included in the study for a broader overview. Benjamin Zephaniah’s autobiography, *The Life and Rhymes of Benjamin Zephaniah* (2018), is used to contextualise his poetry with real life experiences which often form the basis of his poems. Critical works on Zephaniah’s poetry are limited, hence I have to had to rely on my personal readings of the poems to supplement the discussion. There are, however, many interviews in electronic and print media by Zephaniah and I use these liberally in the chapters. Looking at Zephaniah’s poetry, we observe his reaction against social injustice and power politics. His anger and rejection at authority figures and institutions like the government and the church are notable in his works. He criticises the way money, capital, power, and politics are abused by people in power which create division between people. He writes against injustices like racial violence and justification of war. He demands for better lives and equal opportunities

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<sup>2</sup> By “memoirs” in this whole study I mean Zephaniah’s autobiography, *The Life and Rhymes of Benjamin Zephaniah* (2018). The particular version used in this study does not have any page number, thus chapter numbers are mentioned instead of page numbers throughout the study. Throughout this study, line numbers of poems are indicated with “line/lines”, other numbers are page numbers of the quoted information or the year indicators.

<sup>3</sup> Zephaniah’s poems outside *City Psalms* are indicated with the collection name or website address.

for people of colour, refugees, and the homeless in Britain. He exclaims that the authorities are responsible for the anomalies around the world. Most of his poetry is not written in standard English, instead his language is that of the ghetto world and of the “streets”, and of rundown places. Moreover, some of his poems make more sense as performances rather than written words.

The thesis is divided into four chapters apart from the first chapter introduction, the second chapter literature review, and the conclusion. The third chapter contextualises Benjamin Zephaniah within British Caribbean literature. In this chapter, writers from the Caribbean or with Caribbean roots such as Jean Rhys, Samuel Selvon, Derek Alton Walcott, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, John Agard and few others are briefly studied. The context of the “Windrush”, which documents the exodus of Caribbean people into Britain from 1940s onwards, is also taken into account. Issues of racism, identity, language, and history by these writers are studied in a comparative manner with reference to Benjamin Zephaniah’s works. The fourth chapter discusses Zephaniah’s emergence as a poet in British Caribbean literary culture. With reference to his poetry and autobiography, this chapter examines how Zephaniah emerged and grows as a poet, the issues which inspired him, the people who influenced him, and the constraints he faced during his development as a poet. The fifth chapter discusses poems where Zephaniah expresses anger against the authoritative powers and institutions. Poetry becomes his weapon to fight social injustice and racial discrimination. Rhythmic poetry becomes his language of revolution. The sixth chapter in this study elaborates Zephaniah’s urge for unity and peace. Zephaniah writes for those whose voices are weak to protest against power, or those whose voices may not reach to the authority. Zephaniah’s anger shows his reaction to British authorities without promoting hatred. He uses rhymes to not only to speak for human rights being but also for those who cannot speak

for themselves such as animals. Overall, this study looks at Benjamin Zephaniah's poetic protest against social injustice, where poetry conveys his appeal for unity and peace.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Bob Mole in the foreword of *City Psalms* writes about Zephaniah's comprehensive understanding of the "culture and problems" (9) of communities that staddle multiple ethnic identities. Mole points out that sometimes Zephaniah's expression of anger is humorous which creates momentary pacification. According to Mole, Zephaniah follows "a wary, aware" (9) style to express his anger. Thus, humour does not hide Zephaniah's anger but acts as a mask for the underlying anger. A cursory look at Zephaniah's poetry will attune readers to his poetic style that blends anger with humour and playfulness with serious contemplations.

Born to Caribbean parents in the 1950s, and as someone who witnessed the "Windrush" that marked the arrival of thousands of ex-colonized people from the Caribbean islands to Britain, it is necessary to contextualise Zephaniah with other British Caribbean literary figures. Sarah Lawson Welsh in "The Caribbean and Britain" (2020) notes the "shift and transition" (253) of Caribbean writers and writings considering the colonial and postcolonial contexts. She takes the context of the "Windrush" into consideration which opened the path of migration for many major Caribbean literary figures to England such as Sam Selvon and George Lamming (253). At the same time, Zephaniah's poetry is consciously and spatially situated in Britain as Joanna Johnson points out in *Topographies of Caribbean Writing, Race, and the British Countryside* (2019). Johnson shows that Zephaniah's writing exhibits a strong attachment with the "British countryside" (137) even though the subject matter of his poetry is not about the countryside, there is a deep attachment, as Zephaniah reflects, in his poetic imagination whereby the "English countryside connects him to Jamaica" (137-138).

Laurenz Volkmann in “The Quest for Identity in Benjamin Zephaniah’s Poetry” (2008) examines the significance of Caribbean literature in Great Britain. He points out that the experience of “otherness” contextualises dub poetry in postcolonial literature (248). He notes Zephaniah’s rejection of “authority and hierarchy” (256) and notes that the poet rejects certain norms of established forms of writing which serves purposes like creating playfulness of performance and bringing apolitical and political issues in a single thread (256-257). Mervyn Morris also highlights similar issues in ““Dub Poetry’?” (1997). Morris quotes Carolyn Cooper’s comment on Zephaniah that “Zephaniah is the only entrant whose work is allowed to speak for itself” (5). Morris praises Zephaniah’s use of verbal rhythm which has the quality to connect with the audience. Morris notices the “political seriousness” (6) of Zephaniah’s performance. In “An Interview with Benjamin Zephaniah” (2004) by Eric Doumerc, Zephaniah shares his thoughts on why he does not think his poetry is “influenced by mainstream British poetry” (139). Poetry that Zephaniah used to hear in the streets has had an influence on his poetic development and he agrees that dub poetry, for him functions as a poetic vehicle (139). In another study titled “Benjamin Zephaniah: Contemporary Voice of Resistance in Black Britain” (2017), Susan Sathyadas notes Zephaniah’s dub poetry as “creole resistance” (84). However, this point can be refuted with the term “nation language” coined by Edward Kamau Brathwaite. Brathwaite in “Nation Language” (1984) discussed the language of the African slaves who were transported to the Caribbean by insisting, that language has the quality of performance. So, Zephaniah’s poetic language has certain similarities with what Brathwaite calls “nation language”.

Doumerc’s interview provides interesting insight into Zephaniah’s craft as a poet. Doumerc notes that Zephaniah’s identity is politically British but culturally African, a point conformed by Zephaniah in his interview with Doumerc: “Politically I’m British, you know. I’ve fought for my rights here. Culturally I feel as African as ever...” (138). According to

Zephaniah, the “nature of travelling the world” makes him “a kind of internationalist” (138), meaning someone who is cosmopolitan and perhaps feels at home at most places in the world. In the same interview, Zephaniah further comments on *City Psalms* and other published works. He acknowledges the importance of “the printed page”, but he thinks that most people he wants to “reach” out to through poetry do not read books (140). According to Zephaniah, “performance poetry” reaches those places where the printed pages cannot (140). This note is also observable in his memoirs which has a chapter named “City Psalms”; he points out that the book *City Psalms* could “bridge the gap, or make the connection, between the page and the stage” (chapter 40).

“Zephaniah’s life has been defined by race and racism” (n.p.), writes Simon Hattenstone in a news article titled “Benjamin Zephaniah: ‘Coppers were standing on my back and I thought, I’m going to die here’” (2020). Hattenstone writes about Zephaniah’s reaction to George Floyd’s<sup>4</sup> death in 2020. Hattenstone finds certain resonance between the George Floyd incidence and Zephaniah’s song ‘Dis Policeman’ (*Racket Packet*, 1983). Zephaniah’s cousin Michael Powell was killed in police custody in 2003, and Zephaniah himself was victimized by police not because of his crime but because coloured skin in the 1970s and 1980s. Fitri Handayani, Kurnia Ningsih, Desvalini Anwar in “The White’s Felony in Five Poems by Benjamin Zephaniah” (2018), note that Zephaniah’s writing is critical of social institutions such as the police and parliament which marginalise people of colour. Ironically, the institutions which are supposed to abide by law, constantly breach legal proceedings and measures. Doumerc also mentions Zephaniah’s troublesome past in Britain due to his ethnicity and colour. In addition, *The Guardian* published an article where Zephaniah stated that “Black people will not be respected until our history is respected” (n.p. 2020). Zephaniah states in the article about his childhood distaste of the “history” taught by

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<sup>4</sup> On 25 May 2020, he died by some fatal actions taken by some white police officers.

the white masters where history of the black people is not included. According to him, racist people and groups nowadays have their own organisations from where they “distribute brutality” within a “system of power” (n.p.). However, he sees glimpses of hope in some young white people who believe in the unity of black and white people, even though mainstream politics takes people away from that unity, as he notes that “Anti-racists are being called racist, we who seek peace are called dreamers” (n.p.).

In the interview, “Benjamin Zephaniah On Why He TURNED DOWN His OBE”<sup>5</sup> (2020), Zephaniah says that he had problems with reading during his school days and was, therefore, expelled. His teacher called him a “born failure” who would end up “dead or doing a life sentence” (also noted in his memoirs, chapter 17). He mentions going in the “wrong track” but that he had the urge to prove that particular teacher wrong. Then, he mentions how being a part of a program in Channel 4, a UK-based broadcasting corporation looking for alternative voices of black people or of women, provided him a platform for his poetry. He mentions that back then in 1980s, it was rare to watch black people on the UK television. About turning down the OBE (Order of British Empire) he explains that he has been fighting against empire, slavery, and colonialism and so, does not want to be part of that hateful legacy. “I’ve been writing to connect with people, not to impress government...,” says Zephaniah. That is why he rejected the OBE as he did not want to be entitled with an honour which carries the word “Empire” to it. Zephaniah adds in his memoirs that he finds “it difficult to respect an institution that has its roots in class division, robbing people of their lands, subjecting people to slavery and claiming a divine right to rule” (chapter 49).

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<sup>5</sup> This is a YouTube video. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2PSoa8o3ps>



## Chapter 3

### Contextualising Benjamin Zephaniah within British Caribbean

#### Literature

What makes a person belong to a certain place? What does “belonging” mean? To what extent is belonging to a place defined by power dynamics and nationalist politics? Power empowers some, controls some, oppresses some, and ostracizes some. In the aftermath of World War II, the United Kingdom experienced shortages of labour. From 1948 onwards, people from the Caribbean countries travelled to Britain to seek work opportunities (*BBC News* 2020).<sup>6</sup> This migration of people from the Caribbean to the United Kingdom from 1948 until 1971 is called the Windrush generation.<sup>7</sup> However, it should be noted that Caribbeans have been travelling to the United Kingdom prior to the Windrush. This historical background is necessary to contextualise Benjamin Zephaniah within British Caribbean literature because his mother, Lineve Faleta Honeyghan migrated from Jamaica in mid-1950s. Zephaniah gives us an account of the shortage of labour in post-World War II Britain in his memoirs:

It is now well known that there was an extensive campaign in Jamaica and other Caribbean islands get people to apply for the jobs that English workers wouldn't do after the Second World War. The British were desperate for people from overseas.  
(Chapter 3)

This event opened the way for many Caribbean scholars to study and work in Britain often as students and writers like the Trinidadian novelist Sam Selvon and the Barbadian novelist George Lamming (Welsh 253). For the vast majority of immigrants, lack of official

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<sup>6</sup> From a news article titled “Windrush generation: Who are they and why are they facing problems?”

<sup>7</sup> According to The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants the event took place between 1948 and 1973.

paperwork during and after migration made it challenging for them to later prove their legal status in Britain even after having lived and worked in the country for decades (*BBC News* 2020).<sup>8</sup> Hence, questions on or about identity and citizenship have been an issue for the Windrush generation, the strains of which are very much visible in British Caribbean literature even today. This chapter examines Caribbean scholars, who migrated to Britain where they established themselves as writers. This will contextualize Benjamin Zephaniah's place in British poetry. The focus is how identity, racism, history and language are presented in the writings of these scholars from the Caribbean which includes important figures such as Jean Rhys, Samuel Selvon, Derek Walcott, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, John Agard and others. Their works are a precursor to Zephaniah's work where the angst and "placelessness"<sup>9</sup> of the Windrush generation are voiced.

We begin with Jean Rhys's<sup>10</sup> iconic novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). This novel is a "writing back" to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Rhys, who was a creole<sup>11</sup>, breathes new life onto Brontë's madwoman in the attic, Bertha Mason who is married to Rochester and confined there for her supposed "madness". Rhys highlights the breath-taking beauty and exoticism of the Caribbean landscape in the novel. Beside the protagonist Antoinette, Rhys highlights few more black and creole voices like Christophine and Amelie. In Rhys's novel, we get to know Antoinette's feelings of being a mixed race woman. John Agard's<sup>12</sup> poem 'Half-Caste' deals with the same issues like identity and racism, but his poetic voice makes bold claims about identity. Agard finds the word 'half' in terms such as 'half-caste',

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<sup>8</sup> However, in 2018, Britain's then-Prime Minister, Theresa May, apologized to the victims of Windrush scandal. (Source: *CNN* 2020, retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/22/uk/windrush-explainer-cnn-poll-scli-intl-gbr/index.html>)

<sup>9</sup> This term was coined by Edward Relph in *Place and Placelessness* (1976).

<sup>10</sup> Rhys was a Dominican born author.

<sup>11</sup> Creole people are from mixed race, mostly European and African.

<sup>12</sup> Agard is a Guyanese born British poet.

disturbing and insulting. He shows his anger at the racist society throughout the poem by pointing to them who disregard the mixed race people by calling half-caste. For Agard, if he and people like him are half-caste, then Picasso's canvas "is a half-caste canvas" (line 9), Tchaikovsky's piano creates "half-caste symphony", England's weather is either "nearly always half-caste" (line 18) or "overcast". Agard claims that these categorisers need to come with "whole" of their "eye", "ear", and "mind" to understand the other half of his "story". Zephaniah reiterates issues raised by Agard in the poem 'Faceless'<sup>13</sup>:

You have to look  
beyond the face  
to see the person true,  
Deep down my inner space  
I am the same as you.... (lines 1-5)

In 'Faceless', Zephaniah is not angry like Agard, but raises more rational arguments. Zephaniah points out that no one talks to the skin of another person. According to him, even a blind person has "open eyes" to think with rationality that another person should not be judged based on skin or face. Regardless of one's skin or face, he is "a great thing called a human being" (line 36) who is "beautiful". In another poem 'Black Whole' Zephaniah writes, "I can't be a Non-European / I am whole / No Non..." (lines 1-3). Thereby, we observe Rhys, Agard, and Zephaniah each in their respective ways, deal with racial issues in their writings.

Black history is often ostracised or misrepresented in European educational system. Zephaniah in the interview "Opinion: Black people will not be respected until our history is respected" claims that black history was always missing in the classrooms: "I had been taught the black people had no history" (*The Guardian* 2020). Agard observes the same issue

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<sup>13</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.best-poems.net/poem/faceless-by-benjamin-zephaniah.html>

in 'Checking Out Me History'. For Agard "dem", the other side, that is to mean the white side, confines people with their version of history. He writes:

Dem tell me

What dem want to tell me

Bandage up me with me own history

Blind me to my own identity...(lines 2-5)

Therefore, much like Zephaniah, Agard too is protesting against the history taught by Eurocentric education system. In the same poem, Agard highlights some certain Eurocentric historical events and fables thereby expressing his scepticism towards Eurocentric version of historical accounts. Agard puts forward the other side of history as well in this poem by making reference to "Toussaint", "Nanny", "Shaka de great Zulu", and "Mary Seacole" some important figures in black and Caribbean history, who, as Agard points out, remain overlooked and neglected in the European version of history. Agard is "checking out" his "own history" to make his "identity", that is where Agard's opinion exactly matches with Zephaniah that without establishing the history of black people, they cannot earn respect, that is to mean their identity will always remain overshadowed. However, Zephaniah also acknowledges the fact that black history has not been ideal, it has its own dictators and oppressors, but it has its own pioneers and intelligentsia as well (*The Guardian* 2020). A different note of history is visible in Edward Kamau Brathwaite's<sup>14</sup> poem 'Limbo'. The word 'limbo' has a multiplicity of meanings. Limbo is an Afro-Caribbean dance form; the word can also mean imprisonment and entrapment. This poem presents images from the history of Middle Passage<sup>15</sup> and Transatlantic slavery: "stick is the whip / and the dark deck is slavery" (lines 20-21). Ayo Kehinde in "Edward Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* and The Trope of

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<sup>14</sup> Brathwaite was a Barbadian poet and academic.

<sup>15</sup> It is forced transportation of African slaves. (Source: *Britannica*)

Cultural Searching” (2007) notes with reference to Brathwaite’s comment that, the experience of the Middle Passage is not merely a “traumatic” event, but it also opened the path for African culture to make its footprint in a new land, the Caribbean (184). So, Brathwaite shows the “dark” confined story of the African slaves in the poem, but his hope of rejuvenation for African culture in the Caribbean is also notable. Zephaniah’s poem ‘Black Politics of Today’ offers a glimpse of his attachment to African culture, as he writes, “Me know me roots an history is true Africa” (line 12). He puts another point in the poem that, “Nobody is perfect but knowledge mus increase” (line 55). Zephaniah does not claim that black politics or black history is ideal and free of blemishes, but he demands for a general overview of history which should take into account the other side of the story as well.

Derek Walcott<sup>16</sup> in ‘A Far Cry from Africa’ draws violent imageries of colonial bloodshed. He writes, “Corpses are scattered through paradise” (line 4). This poem shows compassion by the poet for both the Kikuyu revolutionaries and the British colonisers they were fighting against. The poet dismisses the justification of bloodshed. For him it is a beastly act, human beings cannot claim themselves to be made “upright” by violence. Walcott labels both these groups involved in bloodshed as “delirious as these wild beasts” (line 18). He thinks he is wasting his “compassion”, but he has to do so because he is “poisoned with the blood of both”<sup>17</sup>, this is, both African and British blood. The poet is in a delirium because he can neither overlook Africa nor leave his love for the “English tongue”. It is evident that he is stuck, in a limbo between his dual identities as he writes: “how choose / Between this Africa and the English tongue I love (lines 29-30)?” This poem points out how meaningless wars are, and the same theme is notable in some of Zephaniah’s poems such as

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<sup>16</sup> Walcott was a Saint Lucian poet.

<sup>17</sup> Jöran Mjöberg in the website of The Nobel Prize in the article titled “A Single, Homeless, Circling Satellite: Derek Walcott, 1992 Nobel Literature Laureate” (2001) writes “Walcott’s ancestry is also mixed, with both his maternal and paternal grandmothers being black” (n.p.).

‘A bomb pusher writes’ and ‘Me green poem’ where he questions the justification of imperialistic war.

The creative uses and various nuances of language are a notable feature of British Caribbean literature. Zephaniah, for instance, like many Caribbean writers, does not use standard English. He writes in the style of oral performance which he notes in the ‘Dis Poetry’, ‘Speak’ and ‘Rapid Rapping (rant)’. Like Zephaniah, quality of performance is observable in Agard’s poetry. Agard’s ‘Listen Mr. Oxford Don’ boldly challenges standard English. He not only justifies his use of non-standard English but also rejects the Queen’s English, as he comments, “I making de Queen’s English accessory/ to my offence” (line 38). Like Zephaniah, Agard does not include traditional rhymes. He claims, “mugging de Queen’s English” (line 12) is the story of his life. Like Zephaniah, Agard brings identity issues, racial issues, and scepticism towards Eurocentric history, and rejection of the standard English.<sup>18</sup> Samuel Selvon’s<sup>19</sup> *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) also contains frequent use of non-standard English. Lars Eckstein in “Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956)” (2017) notes the use of creole English by Selvon (1). According to Eckstein, this novel provides an insightful account of racism, social injustices, and alienation of colonial migrants in London in the mid-twentieth century (1-3). According to Joanna Johnson (2019), along with Selvon’s novel, *The Emigrants* (1954) by George Lamming, *The Final Passage* (1985) by Caryl Phillips, and *Small Island* (2004) by Andrea Levy give “fictional” description of the people who migrated from different Caribbean island to Britain during Windrush (16). However, these fictional descriptions must contain some autobiographical or real life experiences of immigrants. Their identity is challenged several times as from 1948-1981 during which period the British Nationality Act and British Citizenship act were amended several times. However, even in

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<sup>18</sup> However, Agard received the Queen’s Gold Medal for poetry in 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Selvon was a Trinidadian novelist who moved to London in the 1950s.

2018, some of “Commonwealth citizen’s children” got deportation threats for which the United Kingdom government apologised (*BBC News* 2020). This event is known as the Windrush scandal, and Zephaniah comments that, “The Windrush story isn’t history-people of my generation are still affected by this” (n.p. 2020).<sup>20</sup> So, identity crisis and misrepresentation of the Caribbean people are on-going concerns in Britain, where racial discrimination continues to be a crucial issue.

From the above discussion, we can observe how different authors from British Caribbean backgrounds dealt with the issues of identity, racism, history, and language in their writings. Henceforth, the study presents how Zephaniah too emerged as a poet. In the next chapter we will do a close reading of Zephaniah’s poetry where he protests against inequality, injustice, and violence. The ambition behind his poetic protest is to establish unity and peace.

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<sup>20</sup> This information is from a transcription of an interview by David Woode. (Source: *The i*)

## Chapter 4

### Emergence of Benjamin Zephaniah as a Poet

Benjamin Zephaniah's mother Lineve Faleta Honeyghan, we are told, spoke to her children in rhymes. She is the primary source of Zephaniah's poetic development. In the memoirs he notes:

The story of my poetry can be traced back to my mother. It was she who gave me words, who gave me rhythm, and it was she who gave me my appetite for verse. At times she spoke in rhyme, not necessarily to encourage me to become a poet, but because it was the way she spoke. (Chapter 3)

In the poem 'I love me mudder' (from *The Dread Affair*, 1985), Zephaniah notes that he and his mother were trying to live in "harmony" though his mother had a bitter relationship with his father. In spite of the hardships of childhood, Zephaniah remarks that his mother was "always singing some kind of song" (line 13) when he was a child. These songs were comforting and later proved to be inspirational for Zephaniah's craft as a poet. This chapter notes the developmental stage of Zephaniah as a poet and illustrates some of his poems that shed light on the people who influenced him as a poet. The discussion will then focus on Zephaniah's definition of the meaning of poetry and how his rhymes are significant for his life.

#### 4.1 Developmental Stage as a Poet

Zephaniah notes in the memoirs that as a child, he used to listen to the music of popular Jamaican musicians, Prince Buster, Alton Ellis, Desmond Dekker and Millie Small, all of whom influenced his gift of rhythm (chapter 5). He admired their music and used to create his own spins with that (ibid). This involvement with music positively influenced his rhyming



skills (ibid). He adds that, rhyming was part of his everyday life, it was the way he communicated with his family members (ibid). Zephaniah's first public or semi-public performance was at a church as a child when his poetic knowledge was limited to "playground politics" (chapter 7). He would memorise verses from the Bible and chant these at church whereby people began to refer to him as "a little prophet" (ibid). "It was here that I was first given the name Zephaniah...The name was thought to mean 'he whom God has hidden', or 'treasured by God'. I always felt I was a modern Zephaniah," he writes in the memoirs (ibid).<sup>21</sup>

In the late 1970s, Zephaniah was inspired by the legendary Rastafarian musician Bob Marley<sup>22</sup> because Zephaniah understood the "the meaning behind the words" in Marley's songs (chapter 14). Zephaniah sent Marley some of his poems and received appreciation from Marley who replied with: "I love the works, man. Keep it up. Britain needs you, so forward on" (ibid). This appreciation dramatically boosted his confidence. By that time he was strongly influenced by Rastafarian<sup>23</sup> ideologies as well. As noted previously, during his teenage years, Zephaniah was involved in crime because of unrest at home where the father was unloving and imposing who towered over the little and his mother. Zephaniah and his mother lived with Pastor Burris's<sup>24</sup> family in extreme financial hardship. However, two things that served as an inspiration for Zephaniah were, Bob Marley and the Rasta way of life both of which led him away from the life of petty crime and into the realms of poetry. His dreams of being a "revolutionary poet", in the footsteps of Bob Marley, was born:

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<sup>21</sup> People at the church gave him the name Zephaniah.

<sup>22</sup> Bob Marley was a Jamaican musician and famous for his "reggae" music. According to Zephaniah, he (Zephaniah) had never visited a country where Marley is unknown. Some Rastafarians regards Marley as a modern day prophet. (Source: Zephaniah's website: [benjaminzephaniah.com/the-best-of-bob-marley/](http://benjaminzephaniah.com/the-best-of-bob-marley/).)

<sup>23</sup> Rastafarianism is a Jamaican spiritual movement originated in 1930s (Source: *Britannica*). Zephaniah's dreadlocks, fashion and even food habits were influenced by Rasta style during his teenage years.

<sup>24</sup> Burris was his mother's paramour

I wanted to be a revolutionary poet, thinking about the big questions, talking about human rights, peace and the things I used to care about. (Chapter 17)

Zephaniah had to prove his school teacher wrong who once told him that he was a “born failure” (ibid). He understood that if he remained in Birmingham, he would be drawn back to the life of crime (ibid). Furthermore, the police were looking for him. In 1978, he left Birmingham for to London where Zephaniah met two Jamaican musicians, Dillinger and Horace Andy (ibid). From Andy, Zephaniah learned about the music industry and was able to reinvent himself as a poet (ibid).

Within a short time, Zephaniah met an older lady called Sheila in Kilburn, North London, who helped Zephaniah to type poems in his first collection called *Pen Rhythm* (Chapter 18). Published in 1980, this book was “heavily influenced” by “Rastafarian spirituality and politics” (ibid). According to Zephaniah, there was little place for “humour” in his first book as it depicted the injustices he experienced as a Caribbean and a person of colour in Birmingham (ibid). However, it was not easy to find a publisher since many publishers in the 1970s and 1980s were not particularly keen on publishing black or Rastafarian poetry and did not see much merit in dub or rap poetry (chapter 20). However, by 1985, he had made significant contribution in dub poetry as *The Dread Affairs*, his second collection was published in the “raw”, meaning that the book was published without editing or revising. As one of the ex-employee of Arena<sup>25</sup> told him he (Zephaniah) “was some kind of god – the god of dub poetry – and they wouldn’t dare tell a god how to edit his poems” (chapter 29).

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<sup>25</sup> Arena is a publishing company.

## 4.2 Significance and Meaning of Poetry

In 'Dis Poetry', Zephaniah explains what poetry means to him. Poetry is a spontaneous "riddim" that helps him to express anger as he writes, "tongue fires a riddim dat shoots like shots" (line 2). In the memoirs he writes that "I knew my poems worked best when performed" (chapter 20). He expresses the same feeling in the poem as he points out that poetry is "designed fe rantin" (12). Performance is intrinsic to his poetry. Poems are to be performed, to be read out aloud so that the full import, emotions and feelings can be conveyed to the audience who can listen to how the words are intonated, stressed, mused over and spoken aloud. This adds more feeling to the words on the page. There is, therefore, a dramatic quality to his poetry. Zephaniah does not write poetry to please the political left or the right. Neither is it designed for critical analysis.<sup>26</sup> His poetry is "Verbal Riddim" (12), which solves his problems if he has one.<sup>27</sup> His poetry is "Dub Ranting" which does not involve "big words" and is open to all regardless of whether the reader is "wise" or "foolish" (12). This means that one does not need to be an academic or a scholar to understand or analyse poetry. In addition, there is no particular time or place for his poetry. It is timeless, limitless, and not bound by people or their histories. It is the 'everyman' poetry. A surprising aspect of Zephaniah's poetry is that he has internalised poetry as though it were a part of his body or an energy that emanates from his being. He writes in 'Dis Poetry':

Dis poetry is wid me,  
Below me an above,  
Dis poetry's from inside me  
It goes to yu

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<sup>26</sup> Ironically, we are constantly doing this in academia.

<sup>27</sup> We will observe in later discussions what problems he is referring to about and how he proposes solutions with poetry.

WID LUV. (lines 48-52)

Zephaniah's poetry comes from the core of his heart and it is dedicated to his readers with love. Again, in 'A writer rants' he shares his consciousness about the "runnings" (19), meaning the happenings of human societies. Rant is a verbal tool to express the "short-cumings" (19) which can enlighten both the people (the oppressed) and the authority (the oppressors) about social injustice, inequality, and violence. This is to say, protesting against violence with poetry may open the way of what he calls, "luv creation" (19), by promoting a violence-free protest.

In the poem, 'Speak', Zephaniah shows his rejection of standard English. He notes the "bloody tongue" which is his language, the "Nubian tones"<sup>28</sup> of the language is his essence of his "riddims", that is to say this is the language of his poetry (18). The "Yu" which means the authority or the educators who define his language as non-standard, Zephaniah claims that his "riddims" have the "vibes" to make them "dance" (18). Zephaniah challenges "authorised", "approved", "recycled" language because these are intended for the services for authoritative bodies like the "Royal Family" (18). He expresses his distaste for the language by stating it as being the language of "a green unpleasant land" (18). The sense this poem conveys to the readers is that, his actual anger is not for the language, but the appropriation of it by the authority which disregards other variation of English as "bloody tongue", that is to say non-standard. Zephaniah is happy with the non-standard language of his rhythm. According to Volkmann, this poem brings the "black perspective" and "white perspective" in a comparative way, where Zephaniah rejects the variation of the language (English) of the "educators" (the British or the American variations) (258). This is how his language works as his strength and inspiration of poetry. The language issue is more prominent in 'According to

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<sup>28</sup> Nubian languages are spoken by some indigenous ethno linguistic groups in Sudan and Southern Egypt. (Source: *Britannica*)

my mood'. The poet says he has "poetic licence" (25), so he can write according to his wish. He can misspell the words if he wants because in his reasoning, these choices are not a mistake. He can incongruously employ capital letters, smaller-case letters, punctuations as he wishes in his writings for these are appropriate to him. He can "REpeat" (25) as much as he wants. No matter how his "PeN" scribbles words, these compositions are "rite" (right), and he is not "rong" (wrong) (25). Zephaniah exclaims that his poetry is his property, no can impose any rules and no one has the authority to "question" (25) his writing style:

MY CAPITAL LetteRs go where i liKE

i order from MY PeN, I verse the way i like

(i do my spelling write)

According to My MOod.

i HAve poetic licence.... (lines 3-7)

In simple words, Zephaniah is celebrating his ownership of the English language and stripping it off its British imperialist roots and history by making this once colonial language his very own linguistic vehicle for self-expression. No one can confine his poetry or place constraints in his writing. Zephaniah rejects formal stylistics of standard English by getting rid of syntactical and grammatical codes altogether. The way he mis/uses the rules of English depending on his mood may not an academic or scholarly endeavour, but Zephaniah is not interested in poetry as a scholarly pursuit. Thus, poetry gives Zephaniah the freedom to break linguistic constraints by which he becomes the sole authority of his own brand of the English language that bears the stamp of his distinct past and the colonial past of the Caribbean.

In ‘Pencil me in’ (recited version),<sup>29</sup> he claims that “poetry” is his pencil and it is in “harmony” with him. The pencil is his companion that express his “thoughts”, “secrets”, “fears”, and pains. Poetry always remains with him “through space and time” and it is the art to manifest his good and bad experiences. It is not a “fake” art, he is a dreamer and visionary, and his poetry has “a point to make”. In spite of living in a world of chaos and disparity, he needs to make his point “peacefully”. Poetry is the means by which “word wars” are fought in Zephaniah’s estimation, and this is his way of enacting a peaceful protest with words. Poetry is his “pencil” that sketches his life experiences on the page. In ‘Dis Poetry’ and ‘A writer rants’, the poet intimates that poetry empowers him with words. Similarly, these sentiments are visible in ‘Pencil me in’. In addition, in ‘Us & Dem’ he writes that political and statutory authorities who talk about “unity”, “liberation”, and “equality” are full of double-tall (44). In reality, they are greedy for “power”, ready to fight with their “troops” whenever their authority is threatened (44). Poetry is Zephaniah’s troop that enables him to fight those who divide people into binaries of “us” versus “them”. He writes: “I write dis poem fe more dan Art / I live a struggle, de poem plays a part...” (lines 27-28). So, the “sketch” Zephaniah draws with his pencil named “poetry” is not a mere art that depicts his struggles, poetry is also a “revolutionary” tool that articulates his protest and anger at social injustice in a “friendly” manner (44-45).

Oral poetry, as Zephaniah claims in ‘Rapid Rapping (rant)’, is no longer a subculture. Oral poetry is more “alive” (38) than the traditional written poetry. People can no longer ignore the emotions that “dub”, “reggae”, “jazz”, “rock”, and “jive” convey (38). These forms of oral literature are “verbal reaction” against tricky “politricks” and hypocritical

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<sup>29</sup> This is available on his YouTube channel. The written version and oral version are slightly different. The oral version is taken into account here.

Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=SRPencil+Me+In%3A&v=UxyS8fs1nBg>

diplomacy (38). Everybody in society has their own views about political and “diplomatic” (38) oppression, thus “everybody has a rap” (line 10) which expresses their feelings. Zephaniah adds that, black rappers such “KRS 1” and “X CLAN”, who are identified as “Public Enemy” in America for rapping on behalf of “black equality” inspire him (38). Zephaniah praises a few other pioneers of oral poetry such as Mutabaruka, Oku Onuora, John Agard and few others (39). It is worth stressing that Zephaniah is keen to establish the oral history of poetry, that poetry existed even before written books did (39). However, he laments that this early “poetry was stolen” from the oral performers and was imprisoned in the bookshelves (40). Zephaniah does not claim that reading is “wrong” but he is displeased with those who disregard the “oral tradition” of poetry (40). He is displeased with lawmakers and the media for they often suppress the voice of “rap” artists or “rappers”:

Lawmakers and media try holding rappers back

An it's no coincidence that most rappers are Black. (lines 87-88)

He claims that “every street” is a stage for rappers and their duty of is to be “honest” and “true”, and then they can make their impact in a manner that they will make “history” (40). So, the significance of “oral tradition” (40) in Zephaniah’s poetry is notable. In a few lines before he ends the poem, he writes: “I hav a rappin mudder / Everybody has dere rap so let’s rap to each other” (lines 93-94). These lines once again bring back to the point that his primary source of poetry, which is his mother Honeyghan. These lines also remind the reader of another point which is that poetry is universal and it is open to all as Zephaniah notes in ‘Dis Poetry’.

In the poem ‘No Problem’,<sup>30</sup> Zephaniah remarks that, “I am born academic”<sup>31</sup> (line 6), however we find in Zephaniah to be a born poet. He put down the gun and embraced pen,

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<sup>30</sup> Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Benjamin-zephaniah-no-problem-annotated>

he quit the path of violence and raised his voice against the social anomalies in Britain. The people who inspired him for being a poet are significant in this sense that otherwise we would have had a gangster “Benjamin” instead of the poet “Zephaniah”. The influence of Bob Marley and Rastafarian ideologies are thus crucial for Zephaniah. He claims of being fortunate for having found “poetry” as a gift. Zephaniah found in poetry a form of revolution that is peaceful: a “literate art”<sup>32</sup> of protest against the deviations of human society, deviations those are promoted by authority figures and institutions that perpetuate injustice.

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<sup>31</sup> Perhaps, he means he is a born scholar.

<sup>32</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Mary Louise Pratt’s essay “Arts of the Contact Zone”, *Profession*, 1991, p. 37.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Poetic Revolution: A Rhythmic Voice of Protest**

What is poetic protest? Why does Benjamin Zephaniah's poetry need to protest? First of all, employing poetry to protest social ills and injustices attests to a non-violent and systematic approach to protest. Secondly, artistic protest is a literate method to point out social anomalies. Poetry can demonstrate social problems and thus violent forms of protest can be avoided with poetry. Poetry overflows the emotion of the poet and has the persuasive quality to imbue the audience. Zephaniah's "ammunition" (19) poetry, deals with various social aspects like domestic violence, racial discrimination, and justification of violence by authorities and institutions. His poetry interplays with the thought of audience and makes them aware about the social discrepancies.

#### **5.1 Poetry against Domestic Violence**

In the poem 'Man to Man', Zephaniah remonstrates against gender inequality. This protest is humorous but thought-provoking. It exhibits his resentment against domestic abuse, where he claims that a man who cannot perform household chores such as cooking, sewing, and washing acts as a "King" and "a supreme Master" and whose power is limited "from front garden to back garden" (11). The anger in the poem is expressed through sarcasm. Zephaniah is suggesting that the man who despises household chores plays the role of a micro level coloniser at home. This "macho man", the "controller" whose power is limited "from the lift to the balcony" wants "food", "cloth", and "woman" ready for him when he wills it and as he wills it (11). A witness to domestic abuse from an early age, Zephaniah intimates that abuse began at his own home where his father would periodically abuse his mother, something he did not quite comprehend or even protest against as a child. The reason for bringing this autobiographical note into discussion is that, strangely, Zephaniah himself was what he

called, a “woman beater”, even though he later “reformed” himself and learned to express positivity instead of violence.<sup>33</sup> We know this from the controversial newspaper item that came out in *The Guardian* in 2018 by the Alison Flood, who wrote a piece titled “Benjamin Zephaniah admits to hitting a former girlfriend”. The title of the piece is obviously self-explanatory. Flood made references to Zephaniah’s interview to “BBC Radio 5 Live” hosted by Nihal Arthanayake in 2018 that Zephaniah regrets having physically harmed a past girlfriend. Zephaniah found himself hypocritical for preaching about political rights of the oppressed in his writing when he himself was an oppressor at home. In the live session with the BBC, Zephaniah recited lines from his poems pointing out that one should look at the “domestic crisis” one perpetrates before talking about the injustice around the world. Thus, the poetic protest Zephaniah displays in ‘Man to Man’, is not only his reaction to other men, but his reaction to himself and his past self. In this sense, we can argue that Zephaniah’s poems have been about himself and written for himself so that his poetry is imbued with a certain biographical element whereby the present self writes about and writes back to the past self in need of reform.

The issue of domestic violence is of prime concern in another poem by Zephaniah called ‘She’s crying for many’. In the poem, the narrator appeals to “stop” violence against women who are all his sisters (55). He can feel the “punches” and the “kicks” by the male partners of those women because his sisters are made of the same “flesh” and “bone” as he is (55). The “sick” men who inflict physical pain cannot hear the “screaming” of the women, and even the law enforcing agencies do not take this matter seriously (55). Domestic violence against women is a veritable social and personal sickness:

It’s cruel, you’re unhealthy,  
Yu should live alone,

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<sup>33</sup> The information is in his website in a note named “When is a man not a man?”

Dat problem needs checking.... (lines 30-32)

These men are dictators who treat women as their own properties. They have forgotten that their mothers are also women (55). In the BBC interview with Arthanayake, Zephaniah remarks that controlling women was a herd mentality than many men in his immediate friend circle practiced. In this poem, Zephaniah reproaches the idea that a man should control and lord over a woman.

## 5.2 Anger at Racial Discrimination

Benjamin Zephaniah has had a chequered history with the authority even before charges of domestic abuse were made public. He claims in the memoirs that he was falsely accused of robbing a woman in the 1970s (chapter 14). Later he found out that the woman a sex worker who collaborated with the police to frame him (ibid). Zephaniah was victimised by the British police several times in the late 1970s and 1980s for showing his solidarity with anti-racist processions in London. In the song, 'Dis Policeman'<sup>34</sup> (*Racket Packet*, 1983), he gives an account of the discriminatory attitude of British police towards black people. The police try to "control" and dominate the black people and some black people like Zephaniah try to "fight back" against the police. However, some of these black people work as "informers" of the police. This raises an important issue that black people are not united against their oppressors, sometimes they are submissive to the authorities. In 'Black Politics of Today', Zephaniah writes about the need for unity among the black population of Britain which was substantially absent as he points out in 'Dis Policeman'. Zephaniah claims that "dis" policeman does not have the courage to arrest him with any legal clause so that the policeman

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<sup>34</sup> The song is retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n\\_PRL1Z\\_Li4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_PRL1Z_Li4) and the lyrics is retrieved from <https://musikguru.de/benjamin-zephaniah/songtext-dis-policeman-keeps-on-kicking-me-to-death-658655.html>

gets him “from behind” meaning, to arrest him unlawfully or unofficially that will not warrant legal checks and procedures. Furthermore, “dis” policeman can imprison his body, but cannot imprison his “mind”. He likens the policeman to a “bat” which executes its “evil plan” at night “like a thief”. The police breaches Zephaniah’s freedom and rights as a human. However, not only does the white policeman resist anti-racist protests, there are some “BLACK” police as well whom Zephaniah calls “traitors”. These black policeman and their black informers are traitors in the “war” which Zephaniah and those like him are fighting against racist xenophobia and discrimination.

In the poems, ‘Call it what yu like’ and ‘No rights red and half dead’, we find notes where the British police did not take any actions against “extreme right-wing National Front” which was promoting racism (chapter 19). On the other hand Zephaniah and groups of anti-racist protesters that included “Punks” and Anti-Nazi campaigners were attacked by the police. These poems are connected to two different events, one was on 23 April 1979. Zephaniah was marching “against racists under the banner of the Anti Nazi League (ANL)<sup>35</sup>” (chapter 19). He was arrested and tortured. ‘No rights red an half dead’ gives a similar poetic description where the police tortures a person (apparently black) as Zephaniah was tortured on the day:

Nose bleeding, my arms forced behind my back, I was bundled into a police van and beaten even more once inside it. (Chapter 19)

In the poem, Zephaniah indicates to “some bad politrick” (line 16), that is to mean political tricks are responsible for such violence. He comments on the reluctance about racial issues in late 1970s of Mrs Margaret Thatcher, then Prime Minister of United Kingdom in another poem ‘As a African’. Zephaniah writes that as a representative of black people in Britain, the

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<sup>35</sup> ANL is an anti-racist league which promotes “Love Music Hate Racism”. (Source: Website of The British Museum)

speaker of the poem met “Mr Ayatollah”<sup>36</sup> and “Mr President USA” (28). They told the speaker to mind his “own business”, but “Mrs Thatcher didn’t even talk” to the speaker (28). Zephaniah accuses Thatcher for being a supporter of racism in his memoirs (chapter 19). A subsequent event took place on 29 June 1979, when a group from National Front attacked the “Punks” and the Anti-Nazi campaigners as presented by Zephaniah in ‘Call it what yu like’ (43). This was another racist attack on the black people where the police played the role of silent observers Zephaniah remarks: “Not one police number came” (line 70). Therefore, we can see a clear indication that racism was supported and nurtured by British political powers in the 1970s and 1980s.

Zephaniah comments on racism and death in police custody in the memoirs in the chapter titled “Justice for Us” (chapter 47). Zephaniah notes a tragic event of his cousin, Michael Powell, who died in police custody in 2003 (chapter 47). Death of black people was no longer surprising or shocking to Zephaniah, thus he did not take it seriously when he heard it on the radio until he realised it was one of his family members (ibid). By that time Zephaniah was well known as a “campaigner”, and his actions and words were under the surveillance of law enforcing agencies (ibid). Six years later in 2009, it was found out that Powell died by “positional asphyxia” (ibid).<sup>37</sup> Zephaniah notes that, by enforcing anti-racist laws “you can control people’s actions you can’t control their thoughts” (ibid). He observes that even in contemporary world, black teenagers are at risk of being victimised by police (ibid). In ‘A Picture of a Sign’ Zephaniah makes an apprehensive note (back in the 1990s, as *City Psalms* was published in 1992) which is still in resonance after decades:

I saw a picture of a Policeman

Beating a Bredda.... (lines 11-12)

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<sup>36</sup> Ruhollah Khomeini was an Iranian religious leader. (Source: *Britannica*)

<sup>37</sup> That incident was quite similar to George Floyd’s death in 2020.

Thereby, we see that most of the times ‘police supported by dirty politics’ played a negative role in promoting racist discrimination and xenophobia. Zephaniah was inspired by another black revolutionary figure, Nelson Mandela<sup>38</sup> who, Zephaniah argues, was an icon of “peaceful revolution” instead of “revenge” (chapter 38). Zephaniah recreates in his poetry Mandela’s method of protesting violence without resorting to violence.

### **5.3 Protest against Authority Figures and Social Institutions**

In ‘Money (rant)’, we find the poet is angry at capitalism and the “Economic War” (21) it promotes. In the memoirs he writes, “Capitalism needs wars but it also needs a fear industry. It always has to have a new enemy” (chapter 57). Zephaniah points out the social and personal problems that money creates whereby brothers turn into strangers, friends into enemies, making marriages, and marriages lead to divorces, and so on (20-21). He protests against the problems that money creates by ranting that:

Children a dying

Spies a spying

Refugees a fleeing

Politicians a lying.... (lines 29-32)

He expresses his rejection of the overarching power of money. According to him, people need food and they can grow it, and those who are slaves to money can eat their money instead of food. He writes: “Mek me grow my food / An dem can eat dem money” (lines 13-14). Money makes the world hyperreal, as the rich people get the feeling of invincible power. For this reason people run after money, which is a legalised drug, as he writes: “Money meks a dream become reality / Money meks real life a fantasy....” (lines 54-55). Furthermore, Zephaniah mentions the greed of governments and empires to make money as a way to cling

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<sup>38</sup> Mandela was the former president of South Africa and leader of the African National Congress (ANC).

onto power. Mishandling of money stimulates crimes like theft, robbery, and money laundering. At the same time, the lack of money makes nurses and doctors immigrate to other countries<sup>39</sup>. Another important issue Zephaniah highlights is the power of money in controlling and reinterpreting the value of the institution like religion, as he writes, “Money brought de Bible an de Bible shone the light” (line 121). Therefore, by calling money “fake” (22) Zephaniah protests against politics, government, and religion which are controlled by capitalism and money; and these institutions are responsible for distorting basic human values and relations.

The poem, ‘A Bomb’ does not look like a poem, for it is a list of bombs. However, this poem shows the poet’s critical approach towards authoritative institutions as he writes “Christian bomb”, “Economic bomb”, “Official bomb”, “U. N. Bomb” and so on (14). This rejection of these institutions shows his protest against the authority and authority figures. This poem does not include one single sentence, it is written in fragments. This fragmented style of narration is a notable post/modern element in the poem. Another important aspect of the poem is that it is impossible to extract its exact meaning, thereby remaining open-ended. Moreover, Zephaniah notes that “xenophobia” too is a bomb. This is logical in a sense because xenophobia promotes hatred and readers will find that he is protesting against any behaviour that promotes hatred. In ‘A bomb pusher writes’, Zephaniah’s anger at the powers which justify war is exhibited. Power makes it legal for some countries to keep “Big Bombs” (15), on the contrary the possessors (states which possess bigger bombs, for example, nuclear bombs) of these big bombs promote wars in other places. These powerful entities make business by selling “small bombs” (15). The powers justify their wars: “Our Wars are Just/ Your wars are not” (lines 16-17). They promote violence because they want to protect their position of power at any cost. However, they propagate their greed as love for the “country”

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<sup>39</sup> However, Zephaniah’s mother was a nurse who had emigrated from Jamaica to England in the mid-1950s.

and “climate” (16). Zephaniah mentions the hypocrisy of these powers to his readers. He criticises these powers that promote jingoism and overlooks the poverty and misery of the common people. These authoritative figures create “false border” to rule people, and creating artificial “famine”, Zephaniah writes in the poem titled ‘Question’ (57).

In ‘Me green poem’, Zephaniah talks about “capitalism” which is “destroying” environment day by day (47). Capitalists destroy not only the greenery of the “planet” by “fighting wars” but also have the audacity and hypocrisy to talk about “Green” and saving the environment (47). Zephaniah writes the following lines in five places in the poem:

Fe years

Yu hav been fighting wars an destroying de scene

An now dat yu dying

Yu start turn Green.... (lines 10-13, 37-40, 70-73, 102-105, 117-120)

Zephaniah is against destructive progress (47). “Governments” are playing stupid roles by promoting wars all around the world (47). As described in ‘Money (rant)’, people are enslaved by money, the same point is raised in ‘Me green poem’: “Lives are secondary, first is bloody money” (line 75). In his memoirs, Zephaniah writes that his ancestor did not have money but lead a good life close to the nature in the Caribbean (chapter 3). The same issue is addressed in ‘Money’ as he writes how his “Grandparents live long” without ever seeing money (22). Again in ‘Me green poem’, he remarks that he does not have money but his people were rich and healthy without it, but the robbers (perhaps the colonisers) robbed them (48). Once again, we notice how capitalism is propped up by authorities like governments and political parties and vice versa. Zephaniah reveals their two-faced characteristics, they talk about environment and peace but are the ones solely responsible for destroying these.



Zephaniah makes a serious accusation in 'Money' about religion being distorted by money and power. The same scepticism towards the established notion of religion is continued in two other poems 'The Old Truth' and 'My God! Your God!'. In 'The Old Truth', he claims that existence of "Peace, Luv, an Unity" between human being from different nations is "rumour" (64). He adds that the arrivals of "Jesus", "Krishna" and "Mohammad" are "rumours" (64). Religion promises people peace and unity, but like there is no originality in rumour, the essence of religion has been lost. Before the adulteration of religion and politics human life was a kind of "milk an honey scene", remarks Zephaniah (64). He raises more serious questions in 'My God! Your God!' "My God" in the title is his expression of astonishment, but he does not describe his version of faith in the poem. However, when it comes to "YOUR GOD" (perhaps the faith of religious people which is manipulated by politics and money), he makes some serious accusation. He ask that whether "YOUR GOD" is on behalf of loving "children", "peace", and "justice"; or the GOD is "brutal", "blind" and destructive (29). He ends the poem with another sceptic note:

My question is,

Where is YOUR GOD? (lines 17-18)

From these notes, we see Zephaniah's ideas about religion have been corrupted by political and capitalistic influence.

Zephaniah puts forth his views on media notably in the poem, 'The SUN'. The speaker of the poem believes that "Blacks are bad", the government of Britain is "the best" (58). Every country imitates Britain because of her greatness (58). These misconceptions are created by "The SUN" and other newspapers like it. Zephaniah becomes sarcastic in the line; "Don't give me truth, just give me gossip" (line 32). That is how the media misrepresent "black people", "women", and "poets" but still people like the speaker remain "blinded" by

the media (58-59). In 'No rights red and half dead', Zephaniah brings in the issue of media as well, where the responsibility of the "press" is limited to taking pictures (24). The press claim that they are helping in the enquiry and process of "justice" (24). However, they are just making business and keeping people "blind" (58). Zephaniah mentions the yellow press in another poem 'Royals do it too'. This poem shows how the press keep making gossips about a "royal divorce", whereas their messages are ambiguous (34). In addition to that, their sources are unreliable, as Zephaniah writes with an oxymoron: "I got de facts from a well unknown source" (line 20). Thereby, the media not only misrepresents facts and histories about black or marginalised people but also propagates gossip about influential politicians and members of the royal family.

So, from the above analysis it is evident that Zephaniah expresses his anger at domestic violence, racial discrimination, and misrules of social systems and institutions. These are some of the problems which Zephaniah himself experienced, and some of which he is responsible for causing, such as domestic violence. These issues are not limited within the black-white binaries but affect all people. Neither are these issues limited within the British-Caribbean or British-African arena. An imbalance of power and dirt "politricks" are in the centre of all such inequalities and injustices. Zephaniah's poetry addresses these issues and challenges these powers with his rhythmic verses.

## Chapter 6

### Urge for Peace: “All People are People”

Behind Benjamin Zephaniah’s poetic protest, there remains an underlying aspiration to attain peace for the people who are victim of inequality and injustice. Is it not ambitious, however, to be appealing for and courting peace with poetry? Italo Calvino offers an answer to this question in the essay “Multiplicity” by reflecting that<sup>40</sup>:

Overambitious projects may be objectionable in many fields, but not in literature. Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement. Only if poets and writers set themselves tasks that no one else dares imagine will literature continue to have a function. (112)

Zephaniah’s desire to establish harmony in human societies appears ambitious. On the other hand, his poetic appeal is thought-provoking that presents social problems to his audience in a rational manner. This chapter looks at how Zephaniah appeals for the establishment of harmony in societies in Britain and even around the world. The most important vision in his poetry is unity among people because unity is the stepping stone to accomplishing peace. Interestingly, Zephaniah also looks at the importance of animal lives in his poetry. This chapter briefly points out this issue too.

#### 6.1 Appeal for Unity

In ‘Good Hope’,<sup>41</sup> Zephaniah amplifies his belief that the planet earth has abundant food and resources so everyone can “live in peace” (line 8) and will not have to die of starvation or

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<sup>40</sup> This essay is included in Italo Calvino’s *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), translated by Patrick Creagh.

<sup>41</sup> Retrieved from <http://beltincischool.blogspot.com/2010/12/poem-good-hope.html>

material lack. Thereby, weapons and fights around the world for resources are unnecessary. For Zephaniah, every person is equally important regardless of his or her religious faith, colour, creed or ethnicity. He knows there is hunger and racism in the world, nonetheless he is rejuvenated with hope when he watches “Children play / With no care for colour” (lines 29-30). So, Zephaniah expects that the new generations will learn how to live in harmony without racial and religious discriminations.

Zephaniah observes the necessity of unity in ‘People Need People’ (*Wicked World!*, 2000). A person needs other people to share feelings with in order to make life “appealing” and meaningful. Zephaniah instructs that people need to “stop making enemy” (line 41), because no one can live happily without people around them. In Zephaniah’s website there is a poetic introduction of the book *Wicked World!* which states that all human beings are related and are equal, and that the poet feels connected to all people. He writes:

All people are people  
And as far as I can see  
You’re all related to me  
That is why I say that  
All people are equal....(Zephaniah’s website)<sup>42</sup>

Zephaniah’s liberal view and inclusive approach are more prominently visible in ‘The British (serves 60 million)’<sup>43</sup>. He re-examines the history of Britain where people from different culture like the “Picts”, the “Celts” and the “Silures” co-existed for centuries in the olden days. Then he mentions the Roman history of Britain. After “approximately 400 years” the Romans were defeated the Normans. Henceforth, “lots of Norman French” as well as

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<sup>42</sup> Retrieved from <https://benjaminzephaniah.com/books/wicked-world/>

<sup>43</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-british/>

“Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Vikings” once lived in Britain. Then, more recently in the last few centuries, people from the Caribbean Islands, from Africa and Asia arrived in Britain. All of these people are “ingredients” that make up and constitute Britain, and they are all equally significant. So no one can say that the British are of a single, homogenous people or ethnic group. They are as culturally and racially varied as anyone else in the world. According to Zephaniah, cultural and linguistic mix between all these groups will lead to “unity, understanding, and respect”. This is essential for establishing justice. Zephaniah ends the poem with a warning that, if these “ingredients”, that is, the people from different cultural backgrounds, are not treated equally like the English people, the result will be chaotic. This chaos turns people from different cultural backgrounds into refugees at home according to Zephaniah, as he mentions in the poem ‘Question’. Dividing people based on their cultural and linguistic backgrounds creates “false borders” (57). These “false borders” are the biggest and most problematic barriers to achieving peace and unity between people.

The political and capitalistic figures impose division between people. In ‘Ringside’, Zephaniah points out how these powers are promoting and justifying violence. The game of boxing is used as a metaphor in the poem where people are fighting each other regardless of whether they are “Black”, “British”, “American”, “Canadian”, “White”, or “Irish” (61). So racism is not only about the colour of one’s skin, racism is a game of “divide an rule” (57), a jingoistic policy that destroys people and societies from peaceful coexistence. Zephaniah reveals more about immoral politics in ‘Having a Word’ (*Too Black, Too Strong*, 2001). All politicians promise “equality”, “freedom”, “liberation”, and “democracy”. This poem is filled with paradoxical comments whereby Zephaniah reveals the intentional false promises of politicians. He states that:

You can vote my friend  
And have no democracy.

Being together dear neighbour

May not mean unity....(lines 5-8)

The unity Zephaniah refers to is constantly being challenged by political game-changers, powerful institutions like the police and the government, and capitalistic machinations. However, he continues to believe that it is possible to establish this unity by taking a proper lesson from history as he mentions in the interview “Changing what children are taught at school”.<sup>44</sup> In the interview, he states that “history” does not amount to the history of the white or the black people or the Irish people, but is the reserve of all people.

## **6.2 Empathy for Refugees in Britain**

Benjamin Zephaniah was born in Birmingham, but he was often recognised as being West Indian by his neighbours, teachers, and schoolmates. This is noted in his memoirs (chapter 1) and in the poem, ‘How’s dat’, where his school mates and teachers expect him to be good at cricket, as they assume him to be a “West Indian” (ibid). No one believed that he was a British, as he notes: “I kept saying I was born in Birmingham like them, but they didn’t take any notice” (chapter 1). For Zephaniah, the situation was such that he was treated as an outsider, as a refugee even though he was born in Britain. Sharing the same feelings as the refugees have in Britain makes Zephaniah empathetic for them.

In ‘We Refugees’,<sup>45</sup> Zephaniah gives an account of the backgrounds of different refugee groups in Britain. Some refugees are from “musical place” but the authority figures cannot tolerate their “song” and they are “tortured” in their own “land”. Some refugees are victims of racism in their own land, some are victims of religious prejudice. No one’s identity is fixed, anyone can become a refugee the next day in any part of the world. The decisions of

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<sup>44</sup> This is a YouTube video. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbPv5B-UnKk>

<sup>45</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/we-refugees/>

“a mad leader” can make anyone a refugee overnight and people can be evicted from their own land by such irresponsible decisions. Zephaniah is careful to point out that there is another aspect that can make a person a refugee, and that is, natural disaster. Natural disasters like draught, “floods”, or “hurricane” devastate many places in the world and people are compelled to migrate because of poverty and lack of food. Migrants often go through periods of identity crisis and emotional instability because as Zephaniah notes: “I am told I have no country now / I am told I am a lie....(lines 37-38). Apart from these reasons, sometimes a treaty and even a “piece” of paper can turn people into refugees in their own land. Zephaniah argues that all people on earth are to a degree refugees because “nobody simply just appeared” (line 46). Every person or their ancestors must have arrived from somewhere else. So, Zephaniah redefines the word refugee by arguing for its inclusivity as a term and concept. Zephaniah’s empathetic feelings for refugees and immigrants are another reason why he says he keeps writing. In the poem, ‘The Cold War’, Zephaniah’s speaker exclaims that:

I am sure you’ll see de reason for de rhyme,  
Yes I am still here  
Cause hot or cold but everywhere  
You’ll see people from afar  
An dey are mine. (lines 46-50)

The word ‘mine’ is significant. People who are considered to be the “others” because they are immigrants or refugees, are Zephaniah’s own people, meaning he is a kin to them. Even the white British are Zephaniah’s people, the reason being that he sees his picture in the “British Passport” (30) as mentioned in the poem ‘A Picture of Sign’. In addition to that, Zephaniah has some white “best friends” which is the subject of the poem ‘No Problem’

In 'Overstanding', Zephaniah appeals his readers to open their "mind", "brain", "thoughts", "heart", "mentality" (17) to understand the sufferings of the refugees. Different political and statutory figures are obsessed with power. Most of the times, this obsession is the main reason behind making refugees. The word "overstanding" itself suggests something more comprehensive than mere understanding. This poem 'Overstanding' appeals to the readers to think beyond understanding to feel compassionate with the refugees, as he writes: "Open up yu house mek de Refugee cum in" (line 9). This appeal to help the homeless people shows Zephaniah's urge for establishing a peaceful world. The elimination of "narrow mindedness" (17) of the political and statutory authorities is necessary for peace. He appeals to "open up de border free up de land" (line 21). So, Zephaniah's appeal for people to coexist from different identities and cultures is visible in the poem.

### **6.3 Sympathy for Animals**

In the current world not only are humans the victims of the overarching power of capitalism. Animal lives have become a merchandise as well which is destructive for the environmental balance. We find some notes of sympathy for animal lives in some of the poems and memoirs of Zephaniah. Moreover, Zephaniah in a video titled "Imagine Another Animal Came And Took Your Milk" (2020) advocates for a vegan life-style where he exclaims how human being can consume the milk of cow or goat.<sup>46</sup> In addition, Zephaniah is perhaps motivated by the Rastafarian ideology of vegan diet, which inspires him to write against consumption of animal meat and products.

In 'Man to Man', Zephaniah appeals to man to "Save the Whale" (11). He also criticises people's habit of eating plenty of "Red Meat" (11). In 'Talking Turkeys' (*Talking Turkeys*, 1994) he criticises greedy human who make profits by slaughtering animals, as he

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<sup>46</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5OW2lr6MUs>



writes, “business men mek loadsa cash” (line 31). This cash is made from the consumers of animal meat and animal products, and Zephaniah criticises this commercialisation of animal. This poem, as Zephaniah writes in memoirs (chapter 42), is intended for children. The poem has the quality to “capture” the imagination of the children and youth (ibid). This can make them sympathetic to animal life (ibid). Zephaniah in the memoirs clarifies the reasons behind his love for animal lives (chapter 10). Firstly, animals do not discriminate between humans because of skin colour, secondly animals cannot fight for their rights (ibid). Zephaniah notes that only writing for those rights are not enough but real action is needed to save them (ibid). However, Zephaniah’s poetry gives reasonable insights why human should be preserve animal lives.

In the song ‘More Animal Writes’<sup>47</sup> (*Revolutionary Minds*, 2017), Zephaniah compares the consumption of animal meat to “murder”. According to him, this is “celebration” of murder and hatred. As Zephaniah criticises the international “market force” and capitalism in other poems, he does so in this song too. International market force is responsible for animal slaughter. Zephaniah sings that “They could not see their animal.” Here, we can consider the word “animal” as a pun. Firstly, he is condemning the international “market force” as brutal. Secondly, if people could think spiritually they would understand that they are animals as well. So, animal lives are more valuable and these should not be treated as mere merchandise. According to Zephaniah, humans are already habituated with “blood of greed” and they have lost their spirituality. However, audience may disagree with the points Zephaniah is making in the poems and song about animal lives like ‘Men to Men’, ‘Talking Turkeys’, and ‘More Animal Writes’, because he is explicitly advocating for a vegan lifestyle. Nevertheless, his insights and vision about animals are thought-provoking.

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<sup>47</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZEII8eVGkc>

He makes the audience realise the value of life, whether it is human life or animal life. Instead of looking at the commentary of Zephaniah about being vegan, we can understand that it is his strong feeling of love for the animals for which he discourages to eat animals.

So from this chapter, we observe the substantial purpose of Zephaniah's poetic protest and that is the establishment of harmony and peace between people, communities, and between man and nature. He comments in the memoirs that "There is no way to peace, because peace *is* the way. Poetry helped me speak to the world..." (chapter 60). Unity, equality, justice are the key elements to achieve peace. Empathy and love can eliminate hatred, which is another key to peace. In the above discussion, Zephaniah's urge for unity among human being and empathy for the "homeless" (30) people are notable. Moreover, he treats animal lives with equal emphasis and sympathy.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

Benjamin Zephaniah writes in the memoirs that, “Poetry has wrapped my heart when my heart was naked. Poetry has eased much of the pain I have experienced. I have dedicated my life to poetry and ‘the struggle’, but ultimately I have been on a life-long quest to find inner peace” (chapter 60). Zephaniah and those like him in Britain have been through intense periods of identity crisis. For Zephaniah, poetry, is his identity par excellence, poetry gives him the platform to present himself and people like him to the world, that is to mean a vast amount of audience. His words speak to his audience, sings to them in order to make them understand that people need to do something against promoting violence and perpetuating racial differences. His poetry makes readers and audience realise that dissension in human societies as a result of race, religion, and culture are perpetrated by capitalistic and imperialistic machines and authority figures. His poetry points out the duplicitous nature political authorities and makes us think about the importance of solidarity among people regardless of race, religion, and cultural backgrounds. Before Zephaniah reinvented himself as a poet, he was involved in crimes, but poetry showed him a new path and a new direction in life. Poetry covered the nakedness of his heart and empowered him with impactful words. Not only has poetry given him the platform from which to communicate with others but has also helped him to know himself, and that is how poetry has been of immense spiritual assistance to him in order to attain inner peace (chapter 60). British Caribbean people like Zephaniah have been suffered all kinds of injustice and violence in Britain. Thereby, Zephaniah’s poetic protest serves three purposes. Firstly, it helps him to express his thoughts on the political system that exacerbates these anomalies for people of Caribbean ethnicity. Secondly, he reaches out to his audience through poetry which provokes the audience to be

thoughtful about human unity. Finally, his poetic expression pacifies his inner anger against the on-going irregularities, and helps him find harmony and satisfaction.

Zephaniah as a child of a broken family experienced domestic violence and witnessed inequality of women at his own home. Some of his poems deal with this issue and come forth with the suggestion that equality should be there in home. Expecting equality and justice without practising is hypocritical, Zephaniah argues. He comments on the education system in “Changing what children are taught at schools” (2020), and demands for a general overview of human history instead of history of white people, so that children and students can learn from the mistakes of the past.<sup>48</sup> In addition, many of his poems impart moral lessons to children and young people to be compassionate towards one another. Some of his poems deal with serious political problems such as instigating racial tension and promoting wars. Britain has been a place of exile for many ex-colonized peoples. Through his poetry, Zephaniah writes for the rights of all humans that migrated as a result of political instabilities and economic hardships. He comments that “It’s difficult to relax when I live under a political system that is constantly creating refugees....” (chapter 60). However, he finds poetry to be a powerful tool against such tensions and discrepancies in society as he adds:

Poetry has the power to heal and the power to destroy; it can be used to liberate and after liberation, to celebrate. (ibid)

Zephaniah’s hope of establishing solidarity remains alive to this day because he finds contemporary youth more promising and open minded to accept diversity and people from diverse cultures.<sup>49</sup> That is what Zephaniah keeps appealing in his poetry, to accept that

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<sup>48</sup> “Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbPv5B-UnKk>

<sup>49</sup> “Opinion: Black people will not be respected until our history is respected.” *The Guardian* (2020), retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/12/black-people-history-respected-teachers-police-benjamin-zephaniah>

diversity of people in the same place is not a problem. All people can and should coexist by maintaining mutual respect, and this unity is the most important pre-requisite for peace.

To conclude, we can assert that poetry has given Zephaniah an identity. The life of a poet has given him the platform and the medium through which to voice his thoughts; he also admires poetry as a companion, and the life of a poet is as a satisfying one. Poetry is his instrument of protest against the awful experiences of racist attacks, alienation, and injustice. Poetry is his voice that calls people to unite. His poetic revolution is an artistic expression that has one ultimate goal “peace”.

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