

# WHEN “LOST” NAMES MEAN LOST IDENTITIES: DAVID DABYDEEN’S CHALLENGE OF THE EUROPEAN SENSE OF GUILT

LIGIA TOMOIAGĂ

UTCN, The North University Centre of Baia Mare, Romania

## When “lost” names mean lost identities: David Dabydeen’s challenge of the European sense of guilt

**Abstract:** David Dabydeen’s novel *A Harlot’s Progress* can be read as a reversed picaresque novel, although the narrative is typically picaresque, and the main character seems to be the embodiment of a 17th century picaroon. Nonetheless, as the story goes, after reading about the abhorrent experience that this boy in Hogarth’s plates is supposed to have been going through, he becomes a tragic hero, the epitome of all African slaves, and of all abused human beings. He carries three names in the novel, although he has forgotten his real name: he is Mungo, he is Noah and he is Perseus, according to the roles he plays, and the stories he tells. The lost memory is replaced with new ones, even if based on an imaginary universe, and the poor Mungo, being a true Noah, comes with an ark that carries the entire humanity of his continent. New images are expected to replace the stereotypical ones launched in Hogarth’s plates.

**Keywords:** slave trade, African slaves, the picaresque, replacing stereotypical images, commentary of the modern society, Mungo-Noah-Perseus, the picaroon becoming a tragic figure in a postmodern world.

*A Harlot’s Progress*, David Dabydeen’s complex novel started from a famous series of engraved plates, with the same title. William Hogarth’s (the author of these plates) use of such a title, evocative of a *progress* of the adventurous character to destruction and total lack of morality, was consonant with the picaresque genre, which was in full swing in England, in the 17th and 18th centuries. The main character of the plates is an *English rose* from the countryside, who comes to London only to lose her innocence and morality, and become a prostitute. The last plate shows Molly on her deathbed, in a state of complete desperation and loss of any human characteristic.

There are other characters that appear in these plates, the Jew, the Judge, the Policeman, and, in one of them, the black little boy, dressed like an Indian/Turkish boy in fact, who carries the tea pot in the room where Molly is entertaining her official lover, the Jew, while another man is sneaking out the back door.

Image 1 is the first depiction of an African slave in the English iconography, and this is the plate that lays at the basis of Dabydeen’s book, as he imagines the life of this little boy, before this moment when he is a servant in Molly’s house, and after that moment, till his old age. The use of the picaresque genre, which even in those times was considered more often

than not low and satirical, has an entirely new dimension in this postmodern interpretation, as it serves to tell the readers one of the most dramatic stories of mankind, the story of the slave trade, and what it caused to African peoples. The picaresque also enables the author to refer to one of the most cherished English literary traditions, a period in the history of the English novel that is referred to as a period of innocence, with such great masters of the genre like Fielding or Smollett. It was in that same period that England was participating in the most horrific human activities – the slave trade – by which an entire continent was set back hundreds of years. A third justification for the use of the picaresque is that the picaresque narrative is made up of fragments, generally employs the 1st person singular, and is centred on one character and his view on the world around and on the behaviours of the people that populate his world. Such a narrative is used here to highlight the fact that genuine historical truth cannot be rendered; all we can do is put together a number of partial stories, that are more or less true, and that make up what we call history.



Image 1

Such histories come one over the other, within the four layers of the narrative, three of which being in the 1st person singular (to satisfy the genre, and to undermine it from within, as the reader soon notices), and a 3rd person narrative, which brings a note of sad objectivity and confirms the inner struggles, the drama, and the suffering of the character, whose stories are set one upon the other, in a complex palimpsest of layers of consciousness, of what the hero sees, hears, thinks, and says. A parallel can be drawn with one of Francesco Clemente's paintings – *Name*. He is the painter of palimpsests, and this particular painting is a good illustration of the main character in Dabydeen's novel, whose name is Mungo, and Noah, and Perseus at the same time, and in turns, but whose real, original name he cannot remember.



Image 2

As he was taken as slave as a little boy, his stories are made up of his sensuous recollections from his childhood, bringing in the story not only a postmodern feature by introducing lack of authority and indeterminacy, but especially a postcolonial one, in reference to the lost memory of a continent that was forced to tell their stories using the language, the imagery, and the genres of the enslaver:

Autobiography of the other means to write an 'I' narrative that is not my own – at first sight an impossible project, as logically no one can author an autobiography of someone else. It signals a text divided between the atomized, free-floating individual and the community to which the individual aspires to return and belong. In this light the project is not only about analyzing the slavery of the past; by rewriting the narratives of slavery, Dabydeen does not simply try to reconstruct an alternative history of modernity. In fact, the novel *A Harlot's Progress* is an attempt to translate the imagination of slavery into a critique of contemporary British society. (Nakai)

In his old age, Mungo tells his story to the representative of the Abolition Committee, Mr. Pringle, who is ready to tell the story in the 1st person narrative, as he imagines that the poor retarded African man is capable of telling it; poor Mungo needs a person of his knowledge and stature to write such an account of his life-story. He will, of course, be also careful to leave out all *indicate or infelicitous expressions* that Mungo might use, so as not to harm the eyes and ears of the civilised English readers. While telling him what he wants to hear, Mungo also speaks directly to the reader, in the best picaresque tradition, using an intelligent and colourful version of English, mastering the idiom in such a way as to draw the picture of his tragic abduction from his African village, by an English ship, and his being used as a Captain steward (read abused physically and mentally). He is taken as a child, and his memories are blurred, there is a mixture of images, feelings, sensations, and voices of an entire gallery of characters from his village in his head. These characters have become his

alter egos, the only “people” he feels are his family, his kin. They follow him around, trying to preserve his identity, his African origins, his ancient stories, an air of the jungle. He is Mungo, but his real name is unknown, he might not have a name, as he is not sure about his mother – the laws of his village might have made his parents lie about having a baby. The story Mungo tells Mr. Pringle is the story of how a healthy, happy African boy was taken on a slave-trade ship, and transformed into a toy, considered to be not much more than a monkey, as Hogarth’s plate shows.

All our stories are made up of fragments of interpreted and interpretable stories, in which we are each other’s heroes. Dabydeen looks for fragmentariness (characteristic both for the narratives of the picaresque and for those of postmodernity) to also substantiate the fact that the language of the enslaver, English, is not suitable to render the African soul of the character, who is the representative not only of his people or his continent, but of the entire oppressed and enslaved world. Thus, the hero is compelled to tell his story (allusions are made in the book that Mr. Pringle gives him something to eat and helps him survive) using this idiom instead of his own. The tragedy is that he cannot even remember his idiom, as he was deprived of his language, and now he needs to re-compose an entire culture using a language that is not proper to do that exact thing. Scarcity of English in telling a story about the slaves is one of the major themes of this book. The real language, the real stories, the real culture and civilisation of these peoples was lost during their journeys on the slave ships, which were so very carefully designed by the slave traders, showing how such ships should look like, on *scientific* bases:

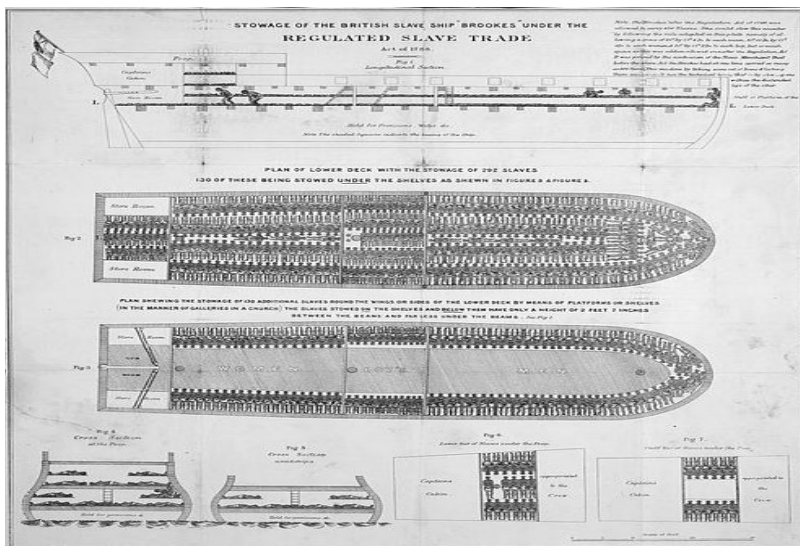


Image 3

In fact, to translate this in real terms, and how such slave ships looked like, we should see another picture, that is closer to Mungo-Noah-Perseus’s story, described by those who had the ‘opportunity’ to see such ships in words like these:

Conditions aboard the slave ships were wretched. Men, women and children crammed into every available space, denied adequate room, food or breathing space. The stench was appalling – the atmosphere inhumane to say the least. (Aboard a slaveship).

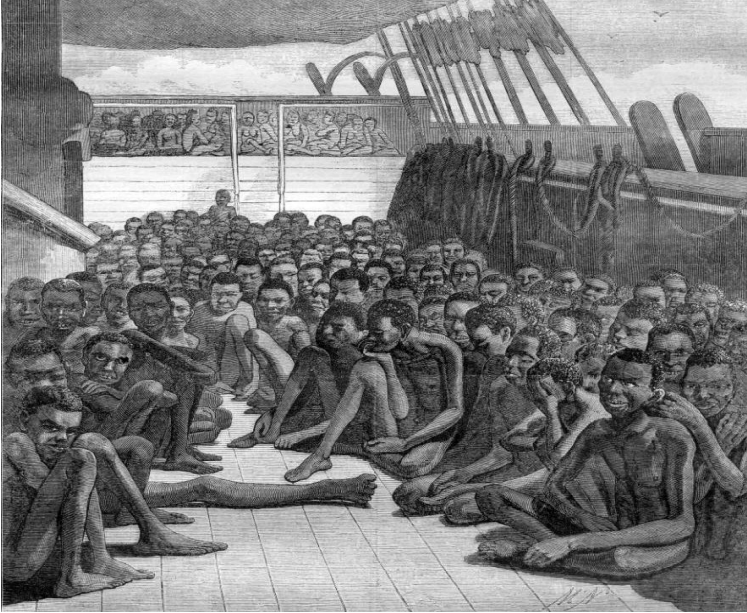


Image 4

It is the story of these people that *A Harlot's Progress* tells, by *sweeping* off the stereotypical image of the black slave imprinted in British collective conscience by such iconographic images like those in Hogarth's plates.

The second engraved plate in the series shows the mistress of the rich Jew (another stereotype enforced by these engravings), Molly Hackabout (with reference to a text that was famous in the epoch, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*). From the country English rose that she once was, she is now the image of immorality, mistress of one, and lover of another; she has two 'toys', a monkey and a black boy dressed with a long coat, and wearing a turban, as if he was coming from India. These engravings were famous in their day, they were the parallel of what tabloids are today, with thousands of people admiring and commenting on them, making the figures of the black boy and the Jew amusing ones, and freezing them in their *allotted* category. Dabydeen's novel comes to find what is underneath the theatre clothes that this boy is wearing, to find out his story, to give him a name, and to re-print his figure by giving it its humanity back, by giving this character the freedom to be human, and to live his life in its tragic dimension. This account of his life starts backwards, with Mungo an old man, addressing to the reader directly, and clarifying his position from the very beginning:

Memory don't bother me, that's why I don't tell Mr Pringle anything. I can change memory, like I can change my posture, fling the blanket away, spring out of bed, dance a step or two of

a cotillion, and babble into his blank pages the most lively of syllables. But a man has got to be grateful and feed Mr. Pringle's curiosity in return for all the pity he lavish on me, the shilling here, the new breeches there. (Dabydeen 1999: 2)

In Mr. Pringle's eyes, the carnivalesque life that he is trying to write for the sake of his public, is torn down piece by piece, like in an amusing puzzle, and reconstructed in the hero's mind and imagination, under the eyes of the reader, in its true tragic dimension, replacing the masquerade of human relations and false Christian understanding of the dogma, as well as the superficial mores of British society with the unfathomable depth of the true story of so many people deprived of their home, their identity, and their names.

Mungo's father was present at his son's birth, at least this is what Mungo likes to think/remember; the hero's memories are related to his parents, first, as well as to his village, which he remembers/imagines as having strict rules for children (who are not supposed to go near the line of bushes), as well as for women (who are rushed beyond the bushes if they are proven to be barren). Children who do go past the interdicted bush-line are punished to spend time in a secluded place, and this is his *luck* when an enemy tribe comes and fights with his tribe and kills his family, as he is punished for having gone too far into the bushes. This memory is mixed with another story he 'remembers' referring to his tribe's ancestry, which left a sign on his forehead, that is the letter *peia* ('pi' in Greek) which came from a group of Alexandrine philosophers who got lost in the jungle and settled there, setting up a civilization based on philosophy and the arts, and who mixed with the black women and left their genes to some of the tribes:

They painted, they philosophized, they engaged in speculations on geometry. They measured the relationship between shapes and planes. They codified thee in an abstruse algebra. And all this civilization they bestowed unto their brightest slaves and mulatto offsprings. Over time a wondrous new tribe was created in the jungle clearing; a tribe of blacks of all hues who could hunt with the naked skills of their African ancestors, but whose minds were robbed in the decorum of Greek learning. (Dabydeen 1999: 32)

The imaginary characters that populate his imagination and make up the world that he calls his "memory" tell him that his mother could not have children, and thus, he was born by a slave, whom his father impregnated so that his wife could be spared her life and not chased away from the village as all barren women were. It is another woman, still, that he remembers to have raised him, Rima, and it is from her lap that he falls down when she is killed by the white enslavers coming from the slave trade ship commanded by Captain Thistlewood:

A noise explodes around me, Rima jerks back, shudders, then slumps forward. I roll from her lap and fall to the earth where I lay in a pool of her blood, orphaned by a whiteman's gun. Rima, who was all my mothers, died... (Dabydeen 1999: 45)

His entire childhood is lost, he is taken on the ship and is taught what it means to be a Christian in the vision of his abuser, who, besides using the boy as his sexual toy, also wipes down his real memories and marks his forehead with his slave mark, which is placed upon the letter *peia* that accounted for his noble ancestry: he is transformed into a slave. He forgets Africa, he forgets his name, and that sense of loss is replaced by an imaginary world; he

has to imagine his old home, as well as he has to imagine the new one expecting him, from the stereotypical painting with a British garden hanging on the wall of the Captain's cabin, which he admires every night after the Captain falls asleep. He is *pendulating between worlds* (to paraphrase Rushdie's words in *Shame*) and cannot identify with either, he is placed between histories, he is a lost child who cannot remember his parents, he is orphaned 'to the extreme' as he does not only not have a mother any longer, but he does not have a birth-place at all. He is going to be at the mercy of a society that takes more action to save pets, than people, as he soon tells the reader across times:

You, English, inhabitants of a country distinguished for its adoration of pets and charity to the lesser breed, will know the tempest of emotions that overcame my Captain. You have the nightmare of Mr. Hogarth's genius, in his series of prints, *Scenes of Cruelty*, to stir you to patriotic rage. You have been so pained by their scenes of mindless destruction – the fatal beating of a horse. The tormented dog, the blinding of a dove – that you have purchased them in their thousands to adorn your mantelpiece and conscience. (Dabydeen 1999: 50)

His lost imaginary world is populated by *spirits* of his tribe, the barren woman, Ellar, the priest-wizard Manu, the village beggar Kaka, and others, who teach him, tell him stories, applaud or contradict him, make him represent them all, do not let him take a moment of peace: he has to adapt to many masters on the English *territory*, but in this imagined territory he has to obey the voices of these masters who do not allow him to forget, by repeating all over again the plea *stay awake, stay awake, remember the land*. Therefore he is Noah, he is the one who in the flood of blood and killing, of loss of memory and humanity, still has to carry with him the entirety of his continent, the long lines of ancestry, the DNA of his ancestors' civilization. The slave ship comes as a black-humoured opposing image to the one of Christian imagery that represent Noah in his arch. Just let us look at them both:

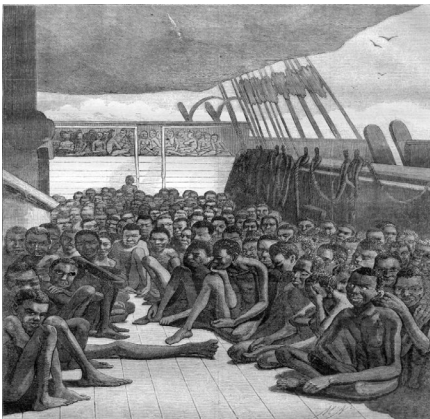


Image 5

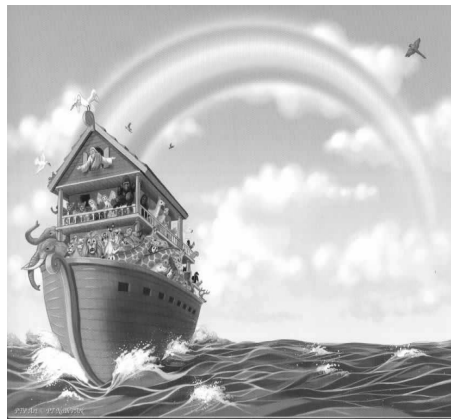


Image 6

Mungo/Noah's story is a story of progress, real progress, not only the picaresque tale of a character that is made up of fragmented moments, which holds up a mirror so that society might see and laugh or cry at the sight of their lack of morality and principles. The

picaresque hero is undermined by Dabydeen, in his quest not only for shelter and food, or for a secure position in society that might give him wealth, but for his lost memory, for becoming what he is – the orphan that he is, the double and triple orphan that he is. He should be able to tell his real story, to come to the real stature of his character, he should not be only seen as a marginal, de-centered hero, trying to convince the reader that there was no other way for him to preserve his privileges, or his shelter, or his livelihood but to become deceitful and devious, to observe the falsehood and pretenses of people around him and use those sins for his own benefit (like a *normal* picaresque would do). On the contrary, he tries to find his centre, he tries to escape his marginality, he notices the sins of society but *feels pity for the sinful*. What he cannot do, though, is forgive and forget, according to a false understanding of what Christianity asks of him.

Mr. Pringle's story comes from a deep need of the white race to find forgiveness for their acts against the African peoples, without actually trying to understand what had really happened, but being attracted by the sight of blood, abuse, and suffering. It is this kind of satisfaction that Mungo does not allow the white race to have, and by opposing this abhorrent attraction of his *civilized* readers towards blood and crime, he gains the stature of his other name, Perseus:

All, or part of Mr. Pringle's conception of my Progress is, or may be, true, but I will not move you to customary guilt, gentle reader, even though you may crave that I hold up a mirror to the sins of your race. You will reward me with laurels and fat purses for flagellating you thus, especially should I, with impoverished imagination, evoke for you the horror of the slaveship's hold, the chained Negroes, their slobbering, their suffocation, their sentimental condition. (Dabydeen 1999: 70)



Image 7

Mungo-Noah-Perseus denies the white people any chance of redemption by flagellation, or self-flagellation, he does not want to make it easy for them to appease their



consciences; he also forbids them to prove their empathy and partake in the suffering of the black people, and by doing so, to feel somehow absolved of the sin of their forefathers. He is the Perseus, founder of a new Mycenae, of a new dynasty; this old man, hungry and willing to sell his story of food (or, at least, a version of his story), single-handedly kills the Medusa and claims Andromeda. In his greatness, he is able to forget individual people (and this is what Christianity is about), he forgives Captain Thistlewood, he can understand the reckless things this wretched human being did, if he sees him in isolation; the abused takes pity on the abuser, and gives him absolution. Absolution for the white race, though, he does not give. He punishes it, he exposes it for what it can do, he shows the horrid reality and the depth of immorality that guided it then, and, by extension of many of those *inherent attitudes*, still guides it now.

The first *crowd* scene he sees of London is illustrative for such attitudes, as the white civilisation seems to have just one real drive: money. Accompanied by Betty, the woman who betrayed her best friend, and who takes care of the boy to *clean him up*, so that he might be sold for good money, on the slippery, frosty streets of London (which appear to be in perfect opposition to his sunny home), he meets with the hungry beggars and harlots in London, with traders of all kinds of goods (of which he is one). All of them are driven by money, and it does not take much for our contemporary eyes to associate these images with the visual abuse that our present-day advertising looks like:

It is Mungo's first tour of London. He is overpowered by the stench of offal and ashes littering the streets. Signboards shriek on their hinges but the people are even more distressing, wandering in all directions and bawling. 'Salt-salt-white-Wor-ster-shire salt.' 'I ha' white radish, white, and hard lettuce, white young onions.' 'Buy a mat, a mat or a hassock for your pews.' 'Buy a fine mouse-trap or a tormentor for your fleas.' 'Saloop, barley-broth, furmety, hot-pea-cods, oysters.' An apple-woman shouts pippins and hot codlings. Others tout hot spiced gingerbread, mackerel, rhubarb, water-cress. Shrewsbury cakes, oat-buns, taffety tarts, boiled tripe, pickled onions. The desperation in their voices is matched by people swarming to the baskets of food, grabbing whatever they buy and stuffing it into their mouths. Everywhere people are chewing and swallowing and belching as if recovering from a famine. Mungo is terrified by the scenes of hunger. "Smoked, baked, barbecued, salted, pickled stewed Negro, freshly caught Negro, tender and mild though from the wild," he thinks he hears someone calling out. (Dabydeen 1999: 119)

This description is memorable, it shows a city that has must one preoccupation: to sell. People want to have their stomachs full, they are only afraid of being hungry, in spite of the enormous quantity of food on the streets. This is the society that chews up and spits out everything, as long as they make money, even if they put human beings on the counter together with cheese, onions and fruit.

Dabydeen's obvious commentary does not only refer to the past, to Hogarth's times, to Mungo being brought to a 17th century market place in a winter day in London. These images only come to open a long depiction of British life and society, that the reader is introduced to in the following chapters, when Mungo is the servant of a Lord, then of a Jewish doctor, a prostitute, etc. In the Lord's house he hears and sees everything Britain has to offer, so different from the envisaged Britain in the painting hanging in the Captain's cabin. The roses surrounding the house, the beautiful scenery, the white blonde people hide so many prejudices, vices of no name, false pretences and superficiality that he needs a lot

of patience to understand what is going on. Eventually, the orphaned, abused, mistreated boy feels sorry for these tormented people, he is empathic, gives them a shoulder to cry on, and forgives them. The very first moments when Lord Montague spends with Mungo constitute an X-ray in the true nature of the problem between the two: there is absolutely nothing they have in common. They not only have different mother tongues, but the initial disposition the two have from the beginning show a lack of communication that is impossible to make up for: Mungo is very much impressed by his *buyer*, as the Lord seems to be nice and kind. He keeps his silence out of respect for the silence of his master. In fact, Lord Montague expects Mungo to show his gratitude, and considers him an inferior creature, less than human, whom he only bought to replace his wife's dead monkey. Consequently, there is no human relationship between them there can be no communication between the buyer of human pets, and the pet to be bought.

Towards the end of his story, Mungo-Noah-Perseus becomes more and more aware of his condition and less inclined to give the white race the benefit of the doubt. He is harsher in his considerations, his polite irony and good disposition give way to another kind of lucidity: he understands that this lack of communication will remain forever, that he is placed in a stereotypical pattern that cannot be changed, and thus he thinks how to transform this situation to his own advantage:

... why should I not generate money from the sale of myself when the sale of the Negro has generated fortunes for foreigners? As a collection of newspaper items, I am *a false parcel and counterfeit story* but I will pass hands as easily as a forged banknote in the City's markets. (Dabydeen 1999: 243)

The parcel is false for two reasons: it is not what he imagined he would be, but he is not what the slave traders imagined he was, either. Like *a collection of newspaper items*, he will not tell the truth, he will not speak his mind, but will just say whatever is needed so that he might go on selling himself, this time to his own benefit. It is true that the slave trade brought fortunes to many people, but the reality behind such fortunes is still there, it still hurts, it is one of the most shameful pages of mankind:

I have sought out alternative and more hopeful headings for the files but my English falters, or else English itself flatters. The headings made years ago remain like stubborn stains: 'Slave revolts', 'Mutinies', 'Runaways', 'Suicides', 'Infanticides', 'Executions by Hanging', 'Executions by Gunshot', 'Executions by Burning', 'Executions by Hand'. In the faraway plantations of the West Indies, in the barracoons of the African coast, I have rebelled, stabbed, poisoned, raped, absconded, and sought escape by killing myself and my offsprings. In return I have been strangled, flogged to death, roasted alive, blown way and lynched. Truly I have made havoc in the hearts and souls of white people, compromising their civility, sharpening their Christian principles to breaking-point. (Dabydeen 1999: 244)

This is how Mungo-Noah-Perseus becomes the epitome of all slavery, of all types of abuses, he takes it upon himself to tell a history that cannot be erased just by good will, and which will remain like a stain on the white race's conscience. Not only that Mungo does not give absolution to his white readers, but he is conscious of the effect that such crimes have had on the white people's civilization, which has become formal and superficial. There is no real cure for the past, as Mungo confesses. Watching Gideon try to fix some potions to help the

dying prostitutes, he understands that not even telling such stories can make up for such cruel and unforgivable events. It is not modern society that will find a cure, either, preoccupied as we are with so many important things like selling and buying more, more objects that prove useless very soon. Watching Gideon prepare his medicine, Mungo has the full realisation that he, himself is trying to find a medicine, a cure for his own wounds, as well as for the wounds of both the African continent, and the white enslavers. There is no such medicine:

Is Mr. Gideon no more than me? I watch him crush and boil herbs to make his cures, though they don't work, and I ask whether he is no more than me, proud and false and of bad faith. He makes his cures like I make my book but of what use? My book lies. The whores die. (Dabydeen 1999: 257)

This reality, these images will take very much time to be replaced by new ones. Maybe a good beginning would be to fight against stereotypical perceptions of the African peoples. The very first step, as Dabydeen suggests is to allow Mungo to be Noah, and to be Perseus, or any other figure. Without forgetting the slave trade, the ships full of enslaved human beings, we should forget the first iconographic representations like that in Hogarth's plates, and replace them with other images; heroes, mythological characters, people with bodies and figures that are human, and just human, with no other feature that might individualize them as different, as the *Other*, allow them carry other names, and allow them to build another kind of memory, and develop another type of identity, to replace The Memory and The Identity we deprived them of.

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