

What insights might the chosen songs offer regarding the experiences of black Britons in the post-World War Two era?

Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'Sonny's Lettah' (1979).

Introduction

This critical analysis will explore the insight that the poem 'Sonny's Lettah' by Linton Kwesi Johnson gives us into the experiences of black Britons after World War Two. This will include examining the poem in question as well as the treatment of black communities in Britain during the 1970s, thus concluding what encounters and injustices that black people were forced to confront and combat.

Insights regarding experience of black Britons

Linton Kwesi Johnson was born in 1952 and is a Jamaican dub poet.¹ He has lived in the United Kingdom since 1963.² Many of Johnson's early poems dealt with the conflict between the black British community and the police force, and that is the case for the poem in question.³

'Sonny's Lettah', published in 1979, speaks about institutional racism within the police force in Britain. In particular, the poem focuses on the 'Suspected Person' Law which can be found in Section Four of the Vagrancy Act of 1824.⁴ This allowed policemen to stop, search and potentially arrest those under suspicion of a crime. The 'Sus Law' was abused by officers, targeting the black community and young black individuals, due to their own racist prejudice. – expand on this

The poem is a letter written by a black man called Sonny to his mother. In the letter Sonny reveals "poor little Jim get arrest"⁵, explaining that his younger brother has been attacked and arrested by policemen. Sonny and his brother, Jim, were by the bus stop and policemen arrived in a van carrying batons. Sonny continues to explain to his mother about how the policemen beat Jim up and hit his head, leading to him bleeding. This shows us, the readers, that police brutality had been committed, and suggests that it was in fact a regular occurrence. Later in the poem it is discovered that Sonny tried to defend his brother, however, he has been charged with the murder of a policeman.

In the seventies, there were many mass confrontations, and one in particular was in Birmingham between anti-fascists and the police, where black youths joined in to express their anger towards police racism.⁶ This resulted in a large riot. Black people in Britain were also victims of racist violence perpetrated by the far-right groups, like the National Front, making the racism during the seventies one associated and manipulated by politics.⁷ To

¹ Jaggi, 2002

² Jaggi, 2002

³ Johnson, 1979

⁴ Vagrancy Act, 1824

⁵ Johnson, 1979

⁶ Hearse, 1997

⁷ Small, p.76

counter this the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), succeeded in mobilising sections in the black community and a small number of Afro-Caribbean youth.⁸ This mobilisation resulted in the establishment of black and anti-racist organisations, raising the question of why there was not enough concentration on the lives of black people who are affected by institutional and state racism?⁹ The anti-fascist struggle and riots helped expose the battles of black workers and their community of fellow black people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Johnson's poem 'Sonny's Lettah' provides an insight into the experiences of black British communities, who all faced injustice and discrimination via police brutality and the 'Sus Law', as well as the systematic racism that intertwined with the justice system within Britain. 'Sonny's Lettah' represents the story of many other young black people that were subjected to this unlawful treatment, abuse, and unjustified blame. It demonstrates to the readers what life was truly like for the black British individual during the 70s and continued into the 80s.

⁸ Hearse, 1997

⁹ Hearse, 1997

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