

**Johnson's Dictionary**  
**By**  
**David Dabydeen<sup>1</sup>**



Picture 1: Book Cover. Source - Google

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**Revised Book review by Sally Ramage<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract**

This is one of the newer books by Professor David Dabydeen's written whilst on a period of leave from academia as an Ambassador to China, where he has been for five years in total. It is a strongly academic book, a novel which depicts the slave trade, abject poverty, greed, discrimination and exploitation in its many facets. The reader will face the slave trade; discrimination against Jews; prostitution in order to survive; ambition; addiction; greed; pain; anguish; suffering and all of *human condition* itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor David Dabydeen (University of Warwick, 1984-2019); Hon Fellow, Selwyn College, Cambridge University, 2021; Guyana's Ambassador to China(2010-2015); Guyana's Ambassador to UNESCO( 1997-2010); and director at ameenagafoorinstitute.org. Books by Professor David Dabydeen also include non-fiction books-(1) Dabydeen, D. (1985) *Hogarth's blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteen Century English Art*, Denmark: Dangaroo Press, (2) Dabydeen, D. (1985) *The Black Presence in English Literature*, London: Hermann Educational.; (3) Dabydeen, D. (1985) *Caribbean Literature: a Teacher's Handbook*, London: Heinemann; (4) Dabydeen, D. (1987) *A Reader's Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature*, Warwick: Warwick University,; (5) Dabydeen,D.(1988) *Handbook for Teaching Caribbean Literature*, London: Heinemann; (6) Dabydeen,D. (1996) *Black Writers in Britain*, London: Heinemann; (7) Dabydeen,D. (1996) *Across the Dark waters*, Basingstoke: Macmillan,; (8) Dabydeen,D. (2007)*Oxford Companion to Black British History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Sally Ramage is a Law Journals Editor. See <http://www.criminal-lawyer.org.uk/>

### Keywords

*Gregson v Gilbert*;  
Sandford 681 (NY Superior Court (1852);  
*stare decisis*;  
slave trade;  
English Abolition of Slavery Act 1807;  
U.S. Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850.

### Main characters in novel:

Hogarth; Cato.

### Introduction

David Dabydeen's eighth novel, *Johnson's Dictionary*, was written during his stay in Beijing, China, where Dabydeen has been, for the past few years, Ambassador to China, representing the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, South America, whilst, in turn, China has an Ambassador in Guyana, Mr. Yu Wenzhe.<sup>3</sup>



Picture2: Professor David Dabydeen (on right) with Dr Yesu Persaud. Source: Google.<sup>4</sup>

The book's cover picture is of the English artist William Hogarth's *The Shrimp Girl*, an oil on canvas painting after 1740, (25 x 20  $\frac{3}{4}$  (63.5 x 52.7) reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the National Gallery, London, United Kingdom). See (Bindman, 1993).<sup>5</sup> Craske (2000) <sup>6</sup> and Paulson (2000) also wrote that English artist William Hogarth's *The Shrimp Girl* was an attempt to show that beauty could be found in the commonest quarters. Hogarth's genius in capturing the sociology of the age was noted by McWilliam (1993) and Dabydeen (1987).

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<sup>3</sup> See

<http://www.peacefonline.com/pages/business/news/200909/27365.php?storyid=100&> accessed 2021.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.stabroeknews.com/2010/05/17/news/guyana/university-of-warwick-renames-centre-after-yesu-persaud/> accessed on 9.12.2021.

<sup>5</sup> Bindman said that '*Hogarth always had a strong pedagogical streak*'. Hogarth believed that formal academies discouraged genius. He felt that if real art was to be about real life, it should concern itself with observation and that the essential qualities of art could only be acquired by observation: variety, character and expression coming from nature, to be learned in a way that did not inhibit imagination. Bindman said that Hogarth felt strongly that beauty should not be depicted by 'the stony features of a Venus but a *'blooming young girl of fifteen'*, an ideal embodiment of which was Hogarth's *The shrimp girl*. See also Burke, J. (1955) editor, *The analysis of Beauty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> See Craske, M, (2000) *British artists: William Hogarth*, London: Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd.; pg 66.

This 221-page novel is a vivid read, even if the reader were new to the subject of Afro-Caribbean studies and I dare say, to Guyanese overseas, reading this novel will bring many smiles, as they reminisce through the pages, the author having fluently flowed from English to Creole.<sup>7</sup>

The author, Professor David Dabydeen, professor for over a quarter of a century at Warwick University in England, United Kingdom, has written many books of literature, incorporating history, politics, law and culture. Professor David Dabydeen had held the title of “*His Excellency, Ambassador<sup>8</sup> Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary<sup>9</sup> of Guyana*”<sup>10</sup> in Beijing, China.

This novel, *Johnson's Dictionary*, is replete with excellent and experienced knowledge of art, literature, history and pain of slavery, subjugation of female slaves to all and sundry white overseers around them, hunger, misery, and holocaust created by the Slave Trade,<sup>11</sup> scarring generations then and no doubt generations to come- of black and brown descendants of slaves - all for money and greed of those who enslaved people from Africa, instead of partnering with them.

### **Part One of *Johnson's Dictionary***

In Part One of *Johnson's Dictionary*, Professor Dabydeen creates the fictitious character he called *Hogarth*, a painter, who becomes a slave owner in British Guiana, where he occupies himself by painting pictures on commission: but who, unfortunately, descends into alcoholism. In David Dabydeen's novel, the fictitious *Hogarth* had taught his 'slaveboy' *Cato* the basics of preparing to create a painting. *Cato*, his 'slaveboy' became proficient in working on the basics of *Hogarth's* paintings, leaving *Hogarth* to finish the paintings off because he had succumbed<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Creole is a stable natural language that develops from the simplifying and mixing of different languages into a new one within a fairly brief period of time: often, 'Pidgin English' within a fairly brief period of time. 'Pidgin English' evolved into a full-fledged language in the West Indies.

<sup>8</sup> The legal definition of an ambassador in International law is 'a public minister sent abroad by some sovereign state or prince, with a legal commission and authority to transact business on behalf of his country with the government to which he is sent.' An ambassador is a minister of the highest rank, and represents the person of his sovereign.

<sup>9</sup> An ambassador with full powers to sign treaties or otherwise act for the state.

<sup>10</sup> The cooperative Republic of Guyana is one of three small countries located in the northeast of the South American Continent. It has an area of 83,000 square miles (214, 969 square kilometres) which is about the same size as Great Britain (which has a population of 63 million people as compared to Guyana's population of only 700,000 people, less than one million).

<sup>11</sup> "Britain had been chiefly responsible for making African-Americans slaves in the first place. It dominated the slave trade, carrying more 'black ivory', so-called, than all other countries combined. In 1781, indeed, the captain of the English slave ship *Zong* had perpetrated one of the worst atrocities in the annals of this human traffic. Round from West Africa to Jamaica, he ran short of water and threw 132 slaves overboard so that their insurance value could be claimed, as it could not if they had died 'a natural death'". At the time this instance of mass murder caused no outcry. When the insurers took their case to court (they lost) it turned entirely on the subject of property and Chief Justice Mansfield said that, although the case was a shocking one, in law killing slaves was no different from killing horses. However, the episode- its horror-is memorably evoked in Turner's painting 'Slave Ship' nagged at the national conscience..." See Brendon, P. (2008) *the decline and fall of the British Empire 1781-1997*, London: Vintage. ISBN 9780712668460.

<sup>12</sup> The word 'succumb' (1400-1500) is derived from the French verb 'succomber', and from Latin 'cumbere' meaning 'to lie down'.

to 'the bottle'. 'He turn into the dregs at the bottom of the bottle', slaveboy Cato said, in part English, part Creole.<sup>13</sup>



Picture 5: Self-portrait of the Englishman William Hogarth (November 1697. to October 1764), a self-taught and prolific painter, engraver, teacher and writer. Source: Google. com

At page 24, Cato is conjecturing that he hopes 'Massa Hogarth' does not die from his alcoholism because, then, he, Cato, will be sold to a plantation where he will have to 'mind<sup>14</sup> pig, not pigment'. The diction and quality of English in *Johnson's Dictionary* by David Dabydeen is astounding and written with flow and ease.

Cato, as he paints a scenery of his idea of English landscape in order to rouse his master from sleepy deathbed, muses to himself and says that 'beauty<sup>15</sup> is not only the subject matter on the canvas – 'beauty is also technique'.

Art is written about with the obvious love that Dabydeen holds for it, and indeed is qualified to, holding a doctorate in the History of Art.

At page 40, Dabydeen writes: 'He cleared his throat and broke into prayer in that same alien tongue: "Ave Maria gratia plena Dominus tecum..."<sup>16</sup>

At page 41, he wrote:

*'...and when we reached the coast and sighted sea for the first time in our lives, a song escaped our mouths, like the Magnificat...'*

It is of note that the *Magnificat* is, in the Christian church service, known as the 'Canticle of Mary' in the *Liturgy of the Hours* and is the joyous hymn of praise to Jesus, her son:

*'My soul magnifies the Lord  
And my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;  
Because He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaid;*

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<sup>13</sup>Note that English is the official language of Guyana, the only English-speaking country in South America. The majority of Guyanese, however, speak Creole, which is a version of English known as Creole English or Guyanese.

<sup>14</sup>The Creole word 'mind' here means 'to look after'.

<sup>15</sup>The real William Hogarth did also write. See Burke (1955). William Hogarth has the distinction of being the first artist in English history to produce images that suggest that ordinary working people have a virtue, a humanity

<sup>16</sup>The full version being: *Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, Benedicta tu in mulienbus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus. Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.* This is familiarly known as 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death.'

*For behold, henceforth all generations shall call me blessed;  
Because He who is mighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is His name;  
And His mercy is from generation to generation  
on those who fear Him.  
He has shown might with His arm,  
He has scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.  
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
and has exalted the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich He has sent away empty.  
He has given help to Israel, his servant, mindful of His mercy  
Even as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity  
forever.<sup>17</sup>*

At page 70, David Dabydeen writes beautifully and pictorially:

*'...She harrumphed when she saw me, turned away and went indoors.'*

The word 'harrumphed' brings to mind immediately an indignant horse making that sound.

### **Part Two of *Johnson's Dictionary***

Part Two of *Johnson's Dictionary* gives us a stunning example of accurate historical details woven within the narrative and especially of the profitability of slave ownership, using book-keeping analyses. There were indeed unspeakable amounts of money profited from sugar plantations in the Caribbean and Guyana, where slaves worked for almost nothing. Some travelled to the sugar plantations of Guyana (then known as British Guiana, where many Africans were captured and exported as slave labour.<sup>18</sup> Under the British, sugar cane planting expanded to richer coastal lands, with greater coastline protection. Until the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, in 1807, sugar planters depended almost exclusively on slave labour to produce sugar.

The British Abolition of Slave Trade Act 1807 made it an offence for any slave found on board a British ship with a penalty of a 100 pound fine for each such slave found aboard a British ship. Captains in danger of being caught with slaves on board often threw slaves into the sea so as to reduce and avoid the fine.

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<sup>17</sup> The Holy Bible; Luke's Gospel (1: 46-55).

<sup>18</sup> Gritzner, C.P. (1988) *Guyana*, Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, Chapter 2.

In 1827, the British government declared a new offence of participation in the slave trade as being an offence of piracy, punishable by death.

Britain passed the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 which gained Royal Assent on 23 August 1833. This statute outlawed slavery in the British colonies and on 1 August 1834, all slaves in the British Empire were emancipated, but still indentured to their former owners in an apprenticeship system which was finally abolished in 1838. The British government paid 20 million pounds sterling in compensation to plantation owners in the Caribbean, but nothing to the slaves whom they had captured and transported across the oceans to work on sugar plantations, etc.

### **Infamous slavery caselaw: 133 slaves thrown overboard the *Zong*: caselaw *Gregson v Gilbert* (1781)**

A well reported case was that of the commercial shipping claim for cargo lost overboard, *Gregson v Gilbert*.<sup>19</sup> The facts of the case were that a British slave ship named *Zong*<sup>20</sup> approached Jamaica from Guinea in Africa with 440 captured African slaves and 17 crewmen. The ship's captain was Luke Collingwood. The captain, the crew, and 440 captured and manacled Africans sailed for Jamaica in the West Indies from the coast of Africa on 6 September, 1781. On 27 November, 1781 the ship arrived at an Island they mistook for Jamaica. Diseased and malnourished, and having to sail on, the lives of seven white crewmen and sixty African slaves perished by 28 November 1781.

Greed has been the reason why more captured Africans had been packed into the slave ship than there was room for, and these cramped conditions together with undernourishment and lack of toilet amenities and sailors raping female slaves as and when they wished, led to disease and malnutrition which claimed 67 lives. Shyllon (1974)<sup>21</sup> wrote:

*'Chained two by two, right leg and left leg, right hand and left hand, each slave had less room than a man in a coffin.'*

### **Captured and sold Africans treated as cargo**

The 440 captured Africans were treated like animals and given hardly enough room to breathe. The captain ordered that 133 sick slaves <sup>22</sup> be thrown overboard because he knew that by law, the ship's owners would be able to make a successful insurance claim on the basis that the Rule of the Sea was that an insurer must pay for cargo thrown overboard if the reason for jettisoning some of the ship's cargo was to save the rest of the cargo.

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<sup>19</sup> *Gregson v Gilbert* (1783) 3 Doug Kings Bench 232.

<sup>20</sup> *Zong* was known as a 'slave ship', a large cargo ship specially converted for transporting newly purchased African slaves to the Americas. An estimated 20 million Africans were so transported into slavery, a true holocaust.

<sup>21</sup> Shyllon, F.O. (1974) *Black slaves in Britain*, London: London Institute of Race Relations.

<sup>22</sup> One slave managed to survive and climbed back on board the ship.

The laws of Britain stated that slaves qualified as ' *merchandise or cargo.*'

The Law of the Sea stated:

*'The insurer takes upon him the risk of the loss, capture, and death of slaves, or any other unavoidable accident to them: but natural death is understood to be excepted: by natural death is meant, not only when it happens by disease or sickness, but also when the captive destroys himself through despair, which often happens: but when slaves are killed, or thrown into the sea in order to quell an insurrection on their part, then the insurers must answer.'*

However, the insurers refused to pay the claim sum after investigating the matter. A court case ensued and the ship's owners, *James Gregson*, and a number of others who owned a slave ship firm in Liverpool, England, won their claim. The insurers appealed the court decision. At the Royal Courts of Appeal in London, Lord Mansfield, speaking on behalf of the three appeal court judges, reversed the lower court's decision on the grounds that human beings- slaves included-could not be treated simply as goods. This became a *precedent* <sup>23</sup>in law.<sup>24</sup>



Negro Slaves thrown overboard from Zong on way to Jamaica.

This case, *Gregson v Gilbert* (1871), known as the *Zong* case, was the catalyst for the abolition of slavery and William Wilberforce's Bill to abolish the slave trade in the British West Indies gained Royal Assent in London in 1807.<sup>25</sup>

### **Slavery in the United States abolished later**

In 1827 slavery was abolished in New York State, United States of America.

However, in the U.S. litigation continued to be pursued.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In the legal sense, a 'precedent' is an earlier case that is relevant to a case to be decided. If there is nothing to distinguish the circumstances of the current case from the already-decided one, the earlier holding is considered binding on the court. See McKie, S. (1993) *Legal Research*, London: Cavendish, at pg.111.

<sup>24</sup> From a basic principle of English common law, *stare decisis* (Latin for "Let the decision stand").

<sup>25</sup> English Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807.

<sup>26</sup> The Lemmon Slave Case is well-known in New York's slavery jurisprudence. In the U.S. slavery's legal existence and attributes were individually regulated by each state, North and South, and at a national level, slavery was protected by the Constitution of the United States and by the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850. The case lasted from 1852 to 1860. The New York Court of Appeals ruled that the 8 Lemmon slaves were to be freed. The case began in

## The horrors of the lucrative, centuries-long slave trade

David Dabydeen, an established writer, with polish and skill, takes one back to the horrors of slavery in British Guiana's sugar plantation, then makes one travel to the streets of London's 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the horrors of Bedlam.

This author's skill and poise as illustrated with his own pen, eases the reader into the slave's Creole or broken English, and as quickly dances over to beautiful English diction and poetry, interspersed with Latin quotations (for example: '*Noli me tangere*') and a level of knowledge of art that is grounded in the best of England's academic institutions, playing with our minds and mixing up our sense of history as if in a dream where anything goes.

In the epilogue of *Johnson's Dictionary*, an old woman relates the bleeding, physical pain and sorrow and anguish of the birth of her son, whom she bathed, hugged, and tried to suckle until she realised that he was stillborn, with naivety and no support; when she did see her family they rejected her stillborn and 'chased her away', after which time she eventually buried her dead baby in a small wooden box she had been given by a kind older man, with whom she lived and raised a family until his death.

England's peoples centuries ago also had their fair share of poverty and misery too, escape from which came only through luck, wit or cunning.

The fictional Hogarth's servant at one stage discusses with his friend how he might create a dictionary for the illiterate slaves to learn to read, a parody on *Johnson's Dictionary*, which was published on 15 April 1755 and written by Samuel Johnson. The 1755 *Johnson's Dictionary* remains among the most influential dictionaries in the history of the English language.

## Conclusion

A good novel such as this *Johnson's Dictionary* is the product of good research.

Research planning and design is a complex process and both plan and design have been made by this author. The result is a brilliant book dancing from Creole to the Queen's English, with the threads of a good story, pure fantasy coupled with dashes of 18<sup>th</sup> Century history, literature and the sociology of the slave trade,

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November 1852 when abolitionists brought a writ of habeas corpus in New York Superior Court, claiming that under NY statutory law, slaves brought to NY, (as opposed to fugitives), even in transit to a slave state, become free upon touching NY soil. Judge Elijah Paine liberated these slaves. Judge Paine said: "*By the law of nature alone, no-one can have a property in slaves*". The eight Lemmon slaves immediately boarded the Underground Railroad to Canada. Judge Paine's decision in the NY Superior Court was appealed against by Virginia six months later, but the NY Court of Appeals upheld Judge Paine's decision. See verbatim Judge Paine's decision in 5 Sandford 681 (NY Superior Court (1852). See 26 Barb.270 (1857) and 20 NY 562 (1860). See [https://www.nycourts.gov/history/legal-history-new-york/documents/The%20Lemmon%20Slave%20Case\\_John%20Gordan.pdf](https://www.nycourts.gov/history/legal-history-new-york/documents/The%20Lemmon%20Slave%20Case_John%20Gordan.pdf), accessed 13.12.21.

prostitution, poverty, wealth, greed and human Diaspora.<sup>27</sup> We know that many good people fought hard to abolish slavery and the table below shows the start and alleged finish of slavery:

**SLAVE TRADE**

| Year      | Country                 | Law/situation  |
|-----------|-------------------------|--|
| 1562      | From England            | Expedition by Sir John Hawkins.  |
| 1619      | Virginia, United States | African slaves landed.   |
| 1625      | Barbados                | English arrived to settle  |
| 1626      | St Kitts                | English brought African slaves by ship.  |
| 1631      | Guinea, Africa          | Charles 1 granted monopoly to group of English merchants to trade in slaves.                             |
| 1672      | North America           | English charter company granted monopoly to transport Africans as slaves to Americas.                    |
| 1773      | England                 | Court case- <i>The Somerset case: decision was that no slave could be forcibly removed from Britain.</i> |
| 1778      | Scotland                | Slavery declared illegal in Scotland.  |
| 1781      | At sea                  | Captain of slave ship Zong threw into the sea, 133 Africans captured into slavery.                       |
| 1783      | England                 | Quakers established the Committee on the Slave Trade.  |
| 1787      | England                 | Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed by Quakers.                                      |
| 1791      | St Dominique            | Slave revolt.  |
| 1792      | England, House of Lords | Resolved to gradually abolish slave trade.   |
| 1805      | English Abolition Bill  | Successful 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> readings, then rejected in the House of Lords.            |
| 1807      | England, Parliament     | Royal Assent to the Slave Trade Abolition Act.   |
| 1776-1807 | England                 | Over one million slaves were brought to work in Britain, many of them children.                          |

Table: reviewer's for this review. Sources: History.

This novel by David Dabydeen is vividly written and exquisitely prosed, and may make a great film that would educate people today of the serious matters that interplay here, and notwithstanding that these matters have been well examined in academia during the past two or three decades, racism has once again raised its ugly head in subtle forms.

*'Slavery is a recurring subject in the works of Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'aguiar, yet their return to the past arises from an urgent need to understand the racial anxieties of twentieth and twenty-first century Britain'. (Ward, 2011).*

Indeed so, and yet, the United Kingdom government is at present working on a new and modern Bill against Slavery. There is slavery today; it may not take the form of sugar plantation slaves however, but as factory sweat shops; slaves in personal households; slaves held for prostitution, etc. So it is right that we hark back to the past because *people's memories are short*<sup>28</sup>, as Ward noted:

*'Whilst racism may have had a long history in Britain, it only became the 'official', legitimized narrative through the passing of the 1981 UK*

<sup>27</sup> See Segal (1995).

<sup>28</sup> Indeed, as UK police have now discovered that slavery in the UK is alive, many have forgotten that in the eighteenth century, black slaves began to be brought into London and Edinburgh as personal servants.

*Nationality Act which enforced Enoch Powell's ideas and arguably led to a form of legalised racism as national identity...Phillips, Dabydeen and D'aguiar can be seen as exploring what is missing from both standard accounts of British history and historical accounts of slavery...'.<sup>29</sup>*

On 24th November 2013, the Right Honorable Theresa May said:

*'It is all around us, hidden in plain sight. It is walking our streets, supplying shops and supermarkets, working in fields, factories or nail bars, trapped in brothels, or cowering behind the curtains in an ordinary street.'<sup>30</sup>*

In all, the use of fiction, such as by way of a novel, has been successfully used here as a vehicle to portray the facts of history and to whet the appetite to learn more.

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<sup>29</sup> Ward A. (2011) *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, at pg 7.

<sup>30</sup> Teresa May, 'Slaves may work in your nail bar too', *The Telegraph*, 24 November 2013.

See also, Editor, 'Slavery trade is tip of the iceberg', *The Telegraph*, 23 November 2013.

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