



## English: Personal Experiences

*Benjamin Zephaniah*

### **Benjamin Zephaniah :**

I wouldn't say that I am proud of being English or British. I just am. It's not nothing I achieved. I don't even say I'm proud of being black. I just am. I didn't achieve being black. I wasn't in my mother's womb, womb saying you know I want to be black or I want to be English. I just happen to be born here and I happen to be born black. But I love the English language and I don't love it because I'm English. I just love it because it's so flexible. It takes on so much. I'm no expert in it but I know that television, part of it comes from Latin and part of it comes from Greece, Greek is it, you know, and somebody once said they would never work together but now we just think of it as one word. I love the way it can take things and adopt them. But the thing with the English language is that it no longer belongs to the English. And I say that as an English man you know. Some of the greatest writings in English lately have come from the Indian subcontinent and other places around the world. Some of the Nigerian writers are writing in, in English. Sometimes English, most of the times English as a second language. So it no longer belongs to the English. And I think if you can divorce it from Empire, which is something I can do, it is an amazing tool, you know. I think it can make us arrogant because we go round the world and you know, I understand that to fly a plane anywhere in the world you've got to speak English. And if to work in a hotel anywhere in the world you've got to speak English. So it's a kind of international language.

So I think sometimes it makes us lazy which is why I tried once to, to speak Urdu. I can speak a bit. And I'm learning Chinese now just to stretch myself a little bit and you know. And in fact learning these languages has given me a stronger appreciation of English. But I do think it makes some people lazy. No I love the English language and we divorce it from the Empire. With the Empire I think was brutal. And some of us had English down the barrel of a gun. We settled into Jamaica we didn't know what our original language was. We didn't even know what our dress was. It's not like the Indian Raj where they allowed them to wear their own clothes and allowed them to carry on speaking Hindi. With the West African slaves they completely brutalised that out of them.

But you know you can take good things from it. I don't know, you know, I wish I would have received it another way. But the English language, you know, I love it. I just think it, it is really amazing. The way it rhymes, the way you can play with it, the way you can roll with it. Okay I'm no expert in any other language but I just think it's a beautiful language.

Living in multi-cultural Britain and being a multi-cultural person as I am, I can jump from one way of speaking to another. So I'm speaking to you like this now which is the way I speak but I can chat to you like this, this is the way I also speak when chatting with my brethren and my sistren. I sound very Jamaican. It's me, you know, none of them are being hypocritical. It's, both of them are the way I am. When I speak to my mother I, I speak slightly differently. When I speak to my brothers around the same age as me we talk all Jamaican. When I talk to their children I sound a little bit hip hop. It's all British, it's all happening here in this country, on our streets and in our houses