



Historical Association
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Write your own Historical Fiction 2022

Wajanja Zuri: HMT Empire (sailing May 23rd)

By Tasneem Howlader

I *needed* to go to the Mother Country. I *wanted* to go to the Mother Country. The Mother Country *will* provide a better lifestyle for me and the generations to come.

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On the crowded streets of Jamaica, I walk with palm trees riding high over my head. I smell the tempting beef patties and the festival dumplings being sold to lucky customers. I hear Mento songs screaming in the background. Something caught my eye out of all of this: an advertisement in a Jamaican newspaper. It read:

[Passenger Opportunity to United Kingdom](#)

[Troopship 'EMPIRE WINDRUSH' sailing about 23rd MAY.](#)

[Fares: - Cabin Class..... £48](#)

[Troop deck..... £28](#)

£28. £28. £28. I wanted to go to England. My mind pestering me to go to England- the Mother Country. But £28! This was three month's salary. How could I afford something as expensive as this?

You guessed it. Extra jobs... and I thought it was hard enough to get just one job but three more?!

sigh

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The sun was sweltering above our heads, the harbour was stuffed as the crowd jumbled about excitedly to board the HMT Empire Windrush. When the HMT Empire Windrush came to pick up Jamaican passengers, I noticed something. There were more than a thousand passengers from the Caribbean, Britain, Bermuda, Poland, Gibraltar and Burma but it was the Caribbean people who made up majority of the ship's passengers.

I boarded the crowded ship and felt the free air swirling around me, I was as free as a bird. My family were waving at me- except mama who was weeping tears of joy (though it didn't look like it from a distance, but you get the impression).

I met a fellow Jamaican, Alford Gardner. He chatted to me about how joyous this occasion was, though only for some. Others felt unwell due to the motion of the ship, the English food served on board or the weather. The main event which livened up everyone (I'm sure) were the musicians from Trinidad playing calypso music! Three of the Trinidadian calypsonians who had boarded the Windrush were famous male singers: Lord Kitchener, Lord Woodbine and Lord Beginner.

Half-way through to the Mother Country, I suddenly remembered something- I should have applied for a job in England earlier!

On board, there was another famous singer and musician from Trinidad, Mona Baptiste! I read beforehand from The Daily Gleaner (newspaper in Jamaica) reported on the front page that she was travelling to England on board the Windrush!

Boy, has this journey been eventful or not?

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22nd June 1948

We arrived at a harbor called Tilbury Docks in a place called Essex.

Many of us have never been to Britain before. It was as if we were walking into a whole new world. However, it wasn't how we expected it to be. I went to London where it was in a bad state. Some buildings were run-down, and others were in pieces. The most important thing was is that there lots of jobs available. The following day, Lord Kitchener sang the first part of 'London Is the Place For Me' for the news cameras.

I and many others did not have a job, so we were taken in minibuses to Clapham in south-west London. There, they were housed in a collection of underground tunnels called Clapham South deep-level shelter, which had been an air-raid shelter some years ago. Apparently, during the German bombing reoccurrence in World War II, local people had hidden there at night for safety.

I queued up inside the rather cramped job center. It reeked of body odour and the underground smell. When I *finally* got to the front, they gave me a job as a cleaner. At least I *have* a job. I start work every day at 0700 and end at 2100.

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I needed a home. Somewhere to stay until I have enough to rent a room. While searching for a room, I met Mr. Holness (a Jamaican fellow) who told me that many people here don't like us Black folks simply because we were Black. I at last found a room to rent off another Caribbean person. The rent wasn't that high.

We were often made to feel unwelcome in the churches, so we formed our own African-Caribbean churches. We used an African-Caribbean savings method to help each other so they had no need to go to the banks.

I worked hard for 10 years straight and was finally able to afford a house. It was compact but at least it was something after all something is better than nothing. There was not much furniture; a console table, a settee, a sink, a table, four chairs, a counter, three beds, and a chamber pot as so the English called it.

As times came and went, I eventually married my dedicated wife, Araminta. She worked as a seamstress and earned half our savings. Mary, my first child, was born a few years after the marriage. Minty taught Mary how to sew. She learnt quickly and at the age of 6, her brother Sam was born. I taught Sam about cleanliness. After all, keeping clean will help save the hospital bill.

From a cleaner to a pastor. Minty, my faithful wife, stood by me when the hard years came, and we were walking on eggshells. Barely enough food to feed my children. Unfortunately, the clothes me and my family wore were cheap and were of cheap material. We sold the settee and console table.

Mary and Sam, my children, attended a school where our race dominated. I told them that if they worked hard, they had a chance of having a good job, a better one than their parents. Back at home, they both shared a room and I rented Mary's old room to fellow Caribbeans. I made friends with the white folks living 'round us. The rest you could say is history. My generation have started shaping the future of our descendants. We've helped the economy grow. We've added to Britain's culture. Most of all, we made people talk more about how we should treat others from different backgrounds. The Windrush pioneers changed the world.

I am the Windrush generation.

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