

**Task 2: Compare the excerpt from the article to Fatou's fate in Zadie Smith's short story "The Embassy of Cambodia," paying particular attention to the themes of isolation and loneliness and the reasons for them.**

In the following text, I will compare the fates of two characters that could not have had more different life stories and yet find themselves similarly isolated from the surrounding society.

Both Fatou, the protagonist in Zadie Smith's short story "The Embassy of Cambodia", and George Bell lived lives in the shadows of two sprawling metropolises, London and New York. Although Fatou's life has been much more tragic and eventful, having travelled from Ghana to Italy and finally London, Fatou has encountered poverty and even rape (see p. 21, ll. 4-12). During the majority of the short story Fatou works as a cleaner in Willesden, an affluent suburb of London. Herein also lies one of the main differences in Fatou's and Mr. Bell's isolation. Fatou's sense of isolation stems from her being a literal outsider. An "implant" from a different continent that now finds herself trapped in a foreign city with no family around her. All the while, George Bell seems to have isolated himself from the outside world. Rarely venturing outside his apartment, and when he does it is only to evade a fine. He complies with the law but not society at large. He lives walled up in an apartment stuffed with items, perhaps tokens of a life he once lived. Though these possessions are plentiful, they can only mimic the life of a realized person. This difference in isolation can also further be explained by the circumstances in which they live. While Mr. Bell resides in his own apartment completely on his own, Fatou lives in the house of her employers, the Derawal family. There she lives together with the parents and the children, working as a housekeeper. She is never completely alone. And yet she is still an outsider, isolated from the main family. This can be explained most adequately by one scene in which she saves the life of the youngest child, Asma, who has accidentally swallowed a marble. Yet for her heroism, she is not rewarded but instead, she is belittled by the other siblings. Even the parents only give her mild thanks, shrug her off and chastise her for not properly working (see pp. 18-19). This shows that Fatou's isolation does not stem from an active choice to be alone but more a constant feeling of alienation she endures. Meanwhile, George Bell was not alienated by the surrounding world as he made no effort to interact with it and had no obligation of doing so because of his independence. Fatou, on the other hand, is wholly dependent on her employers for shelter and food. She is not able to plug herself out as she is not even paid a wage (see p. 14, ll. 19-20).

Fatou is also not entirely lonely. She has found a friend in Andrew Okonkwo, a foreign-born college student. Fatou regularly meets with Andrew, who is a devout Christian, and together they have theological discussions about all sorts of things (see page 16). In Andrew, Fatou finds anchorage in the new world, something George Bell seemingly never did. With Andrew, she can escape her life as a lonely housekeeper, in a house not of her own, with a family that

despises her, and pursue an identity of her own. She goes swimming with Andrew (see pp. 24-25) and even develops the idea of forming their own family.

Loneliness as a theme in both “The Embassy of Cambodia” and “The lonely death of George Bell” is not only rooted in isolationism or the number of people at one’s side. But by a sense of feeling lost. George Bell was almost invisible, lost in the sea of people of New York, ending up as only a name on a table. He was drowning in useless things made to make him forget his shallow existence. Mr. Bell likely never escaped his loneliness. He died like he lived, alone.

In comparison, Fatou’s life looks rather fulfilling, she is still young and has her life still before her. Nevertheless, under this thin layer, there is this creeping loneliness. She is searching for an escape latch and she hopes to have found this in Andrew and Christianity. But even after her baptism, this feeling of not-belonging persists (see p. 22) and she cannot completely commit to Andrew (see p. 18).

There is this underlying sense the reader gets that Fatou could very well end up similar to Mr. Bell. This is also evidenced in Fatou’s communal, almost isolationist, worldview which can be summarized in the often repeated anthem “Better to make your own arrangements”. Like George Bell, she is never fully accepted by the world and now she rejects it herself. When she is ultimately fired at the end of the story for no sensible reasons by the Derawals, she can still call Andrew for help (see p. 26) but inside her she walls up. And when she sits at the bus stop on her own with her belongings she again feels lost but this time she wants to be independent, she wants to be alone.

In conclusion, one could say that Fatou and Mr. Bell are more similar than one could expect from such different people. It seems that Fatou is at an earlier juncture in life, but at the end, she finds herself on the same path as George Bell to a life in isolation, and one can only hope, like the narrator puts it, for a “hopeful return” (see p. 27, line 22) or that she will not end up like Mr. Bell, lost and dying alone.

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