

## Context: John Agard and 'Flag'

### John Agard (1949–)

John Agard is an award-winning poet, performer, playwright, editor and short-story writer who has written prolifically for both children and adults. He was born in Guyana – when it was still British Guiana – in 1949; his mother was Portuguese and his father was black.

'[Agard's work is]... as direct as a voice in the bus queue'

**Helen Dunmore, writer**

Agard worked as a teacher and journalist before moving to Britain in 1977. In Britain, he initially worked for the Commonwealth Institute as a touring lecturer, giving talks and readings promoting greater understanding of Caribbean culture. Agard now lives in Sussex with his partner, the poet Grace Nichols, and spends much of his time visiting schools to promote poetry.

John Agard started writing poems when he was about sixteen and his first collection of poetry was published in Guyana in 1974. More recently he has been writer in residence at the South Bank and poet in residence at the BBC and now many of his poems are composed while looking out of train windows. He is not only a popular literary poet, but a powerful performance poet who has a strong sense of his audience, as his celebrated performance of his poem 'Half-Caste' reveals (available on YouTube).

His poems cover a wide range of subjects. As might be expected from his ethnic and cultural roots, race, ethnicity and culture are very important, but Agard's work also draws on such diverse subjects as ancient mythology, academia, Caribbean folk tales, environmental issues, politics and patriotism.

He is most closely identified with a free verse form that uses the rhythms and dialect of Caribbean Creole to make a serious point in a witty way. However, many of his poems use the language and grammar of standard English, and are tightly constructed and metrically regular: the sonnets in *Clever Backbone*, for example.

## 'Flag'

'Flag' is from a collection called *Half-Caste and other poems* (2005), a mixture of old and new poems concerned with the theme of race and cultural identity. Along with poems about violence, relationships, politics and grief, there are also humorous poems which explore everyday events from quirky or surprising points of view.

The poem uses the flag as a symbol of patriotism. Through a series of questions and answers, it highlights the power of this symbol, a symbol of national pride. The flag can inspire loyalty and great bravery (the imagery suggests this is manifest in war) but in the poem's final stanza, Agard throws out a challenge: does patriotism and hence nationalism lead us to commit immoral acts?

### Bibliography

[www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth162](http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth162)

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