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Chris Cleave - The other hand

The novel "The other hand" takes place during the oil conflict in the Niger Delta in the early 1990s, in a time of British colonialism, globalization and political violence. The excerpt of the novel, chapter one, is set in an asylyum detention center in England.

The protagonist is a Nigerian refugee called "Little Bee". The first chapter reveals some facts about her. She comes from Africa and learned the Queen's English in the asylum detetion center where she stays at the moment. She is probably young until middle-aged. She must also be pretty, because that is a reason why she is allowed to stay, but there are neither more given facts, nor character traits. Other characters who are included in this chapter are Little Bee's older sister Nkiruka, the detention officer and Queen Elizabeth the Second, but she is only mentioned and doesn't play a role in the following sequence. The detention officer plays a major role in the chapter just as Nkiruka does.

"Little Bee" and a British magazine editor meet at the time of the oil conflict in Africa. Some years later they get together again, this time in England.
In the first chapter, the protagonist compares her life to the life of a British pound coin. Other than a pound coin, which can go wherever it wants to without getting in trouble, she would be stopped, maybe even arrested. After this she presents the effect of the manner, Queen Elizabeth the Second, whose face is stamped upon the coin, talks. She reveals how fascinated she is and that she is overwhelmed by the way the Queen makes it impossible to disobey or that everyone around her would do what she wants to. It is not the crown or sceptre, symbols of power, but her grammar and voice.
Within two years the main character adapted herself to the Queen's English in an immigration detention center in Essex, in the southern part of the UK. Only the beautiful and the talkative ones were allowed to stay in England and so was she.
Later on, when she is getting released and waiting in the queue for a telephone call, there is a detention officer reading a newspaper. The cover picture shows a white girl shirtless. The expression "topless" would be misunderstood in the protagonist's homeland. It would be worked out as having no upper body. In the UK it simply means that you're shirtless.
Furthermore in England pudency gets handled differently than in Africa where you would never show your body in magazines and smile right in the camera.
A first person narrator who, at the same time, is the protagonist, tells the story. This narrator is able to bring the reader close to the feelings and his character. The reader only knows what he knows.
The author could also have chosen an omnisicent narrator. He knows the character's thoughts and feelings just as essential background information.
The use of a first person narrator makes it possible to concentrate on the

protagonist. Both, the omniscient and the first person narrator, are possible but eventually the first person narrator fits much better for this kind of novel as he makes the story more personal.

Already the first chapter of the novel sets priorities on the protagonist who learns the Queen's English to be no longer misunderstood in the UK. By now you have noticed that the novel criticizes the British asylum service. A reason for that policy is globalization, in the following way also a main issue. It is necessary to have a certain background knowledge to apprehend that the story is set in the 1990s and to conceive that the main character probably fled from her home country to escape political violence and the bad circumstances and living conditions which are caused by the oil conflict in that time.

Chapter one already gives an extensive view into the plot of the story. The reader gets a first impression. Besides it evokes emotions, mainly shock. The way the author presents the situation seems realistic to me, even though he picks a person at random to tell the story and her own story must be different to other people's experiences with the same circumstances. Having some background knowledge about the time the story is set in is advantageous. The novel can be recommended to everyone, especially to those interested in international affairs.