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A Small Colony: The Utility Of “You”

Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* is a travel narrative that explores the nature of what it means to form a historical narrative that focuses on both the nature of the colonizer and the perspective of the colonized. By moving back and forth between different points of view, Kincaid dives into the idea of tourism in Antigua as a form of neocolonialism. She also analyzes the impact of English colonization on Antigua while at the same time considering ways in which the dynamics of colonial power could be altered. Kincaid demonstrates through her use of different points of view that it is necessary for the members of colonized communities to construct their own histories because a narrative made by a colonizer can only be a colonized and incomplete story.

Kincaid's shifting in narrative perspective helps challenge the perception of self and others. An early example of a shift in point of view reads, “An ugly thing, this is what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that...”(Kincaid 17). Kincaid’s writing in the second person describes a tourist, which is “you,” as disgusting and undesirable, an ugly thing that is where it should not be. Here, Kincaid is expressing what it is like to be an outsider and othered but is also putting “you” in the position of someone who has both constructed a narrative and had a narrative constructed about them. As a tourist, “you” may have created an idea in your head of what Antigua and its citizens are like, and Antiguan will also have a preconceived notion of

who you are, the empty non-Antiguan traveler. This phenomenon serves to make you more aware of the importance of narratives and how they are held up because they allow you to feel as if you have both made assumptions and are targeted by them.

Kincaid shifts to a first-person point of view when she attempts to show her own personal stories and experiences that are meant to give you a deeper insight into how she, and Antigua at large, function in their previously colonized society. On the topic of English colonization, Kincaid writes, "...isn't it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime?... It cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed..."(31-32). The use of the words "crime" and "criminal" are important here, because they are meant to describe something that is not only unlawful but likely directly harmful to something or someone. This point is further proven when Kincaid states that there is "horror" and "injustice" in the crime; this crime is of course the separation of Antiguan from their motherland, and the criminals are the English. Kincaid's intentional shift to first-person is intended to describe her internal struggle with the fact that she only has the English language, which was forced upon her people, to use when discussing the people that forced it upon them. She thereby shows her frustration with the colonized nature of even her own writing.

Kincaid's conflict with the relationship between England and Antigua does not begin and end with language, however, and is in fact much broader. Kincaid describes a time when a British princess came to Antigua and everything that she may have seen was made to look impeccable; this meant something to Kincaid, who later states, "Have I given you the impression that the Antigua I grew up in revolved almost completely around England? Well, that was so. I met the world through England, and if the world wanted to meet me it would have to do so through England"(33). Kincaid directly states that she is a product of English colonization and

that is how she has been forced to view the outside world and also how she must be perceived. She also again uses first-person here to show her personal experience as an Antiguan, this time demonstrating the fact that her and her country's stories have been clouded by English colonization. It is clear from her declaration that Antigua "revolved almost completely around England" that the effects of the colonizer's narratives have an impact on not only how the English and other countries view Antigua, but also how Antiguan view their own country.

One more way in which the sections of the book from a first-person point of view affect you is that they show the separation between Kincaid and the white inhabitants of Antigua. Kincaid describes how on the island of Antigua, there is a resort called the Mill Reef Club that is made up exclusively of rich white vacationers. She writes of the members there, "The people at the Mill Reef Club love the old Antigua. I love the old Antigua. Without question, we don't have the same old Antigua in mind"(Kincaid 44). She states that the people at the Mill Reef Club and Kincaid share mutual feelings. They say the same thing, and yet they mean two completely incongruent things, two things that are similar on the surface but really have nothing to do with each other. The white members of the Mill Reef Club have constructed their own narrative built around guiltless nostalgia that has to do with what Antigua was like in the past, but it has nothing to do with the real history of its black inhabitants. Awareness of this distinction between Kincaid and the others helps to show that the perspective of a narrative is able to change the understanding that people have of history.

Kincaid concludes her book with a possible call to action that gives her feelings on the colonizer versus colonized dynamic and grants you the power to create your own history. Again switching to a second-person point of view, she writes, "Of course, the whole thing is, once you cease to be a master, once you throw off your master's yoke, you are no longer human rubbish,

you are just a human being, and all the things that adds up to. So, too, with the slaves. Once they are no longer slaves, once they are free, they are no longer noble and exalted; they are just human beings”(Kincaid 81). This passage uses the titles of master and slave; while a master has the power to decide their role and take control of the slave, the slave does not have a choice in the matter. Kincaid uses this dynamic to further place you into the position of the colonizer. This time, it seems to be an attempt to make you understand your role in the greater scheme of colonialism; while you are almost certainly not actually a slave owner, you are still a part of a power dynamic. You create narratives, you make assumptions and you have preconceptions about people and things, and while that is unavoidable, you can prevent yourself from moving into the role of the colonizer. Kincaid directs “you” to allow “yourself” to not be the “master” and thus to let others not be the “slaves.” She is letting “you” do your part in moving the world forward into a place where each person and country has their own history undefined by someone more powerful than themself.

A Small Place is not only a response to but a fight against colonial rhetoric. Despite the fact that Kincaid must use her colonizer’s language and experience the latent effects of their presence, she has written a narrative that redefines history and actually centers around the citizens of Antigua. While some have tried to alter not only their own history but that of others for personal gain, Kincaid’s work has simply attempted to reframe Antigua and show it as it is; not only a result of its history and circumstances but an island with its own identity, and thus you are left with the impression that even after finishing the book they will never truly be able to see Antigua or its past the way that Kincaid does. You are the ugly tourist, the colonizer in Antigua, but you don’t have to be. After all, it may be a small place, but it has a big history.

Works Cited

Kincaid, Jamaica. *A Small Place*. Daunt Books, 1988.