



Deconstructing the Tourist's (Colonizer's) Gaze in *A Small Place*

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Abstract

This article explores how, in *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid opens the colonial history of Antigua to negotiation through a constantly changing gaze in order to deconstruct the colonial and neo-colonial hegemony on the island. By incorporating the issue of "gaze" into the discourse of colonialism and reversing the privileged position the white western supremacists have held over the colonized subjects, Kincaid obliges the American or European tourist to focalize the colonial discourse through the eyes of the oppressed and exploited subjects. However, while subverting the superiority of the white western tourist whose presence on the island stands for the representation of the colonial heritage, Kincaid describes both Antigua and Native Antiguan, both of whom are constructed in relation to England and English colonizers respectively, as an image, a construction of the white man rather than a land and people with a distinct history. Thus, by focusing on shifting viewpoints, the constant change in tone and voice as well as the various levels of narrative elements throughout the text, this study aims to explore how Kincaid first deconstructs and then redefines the colonial history and identity from an anti-establishment perspective in *A Small Place*.

Key Words: colonial and neo-colonial hegemony, gaze, colonial discourse, shifting viewpoints, narrative elements.

In *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid describes her homeland, Antigua, as an island in which exploitation, corruption, and the mimicking of colonialism have become an unquestioned part of everyday life. In this memoir, Kincaid starts the narration by addressing the tourist as "you" and takes the you-tourist on an expedition towards both the past and present of Antigua. On this expedition towards the colonial and neo-colonial legacy in Antigua, Kincaid's gaze continuously adopts the perspective of different protagonists (Kincaid herself, the tourist and the Native Antiguan) and thus as Suzanne Gauch states; "to read Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, is to be required to constantly shift your gaze and the manner in which you look" (910). By focusing on this constantly changing gaze through shifting viewpoints and multiple voices and exploring the multiplicity of narrative elements, in this paper, I am going to elaborate on how Kincaid deconstructs the colonial and neo-colonial hegemony in Antigua.

In Kincaid's memoir, tourists are "a collective Columbus, new colonists, brash cultural invaders" (Ferguson, 16). The narrator begins the story with the tourist's gaze only to

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deconstruct it because, according to her, the tourist is “an ugly human being” (SP, 14), “an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that” (SP,17). As “a polemic against the tourist’s gaze” (Gilmore, 100), Kincaid’s memoir opens the colonial history to negotiation, and provides a counter history from decolonial perspective. In an angry and frustrated voice, Kincaid embarks on unravelling the colonial and neo-colonial discourse in Antigua to western (American and European) readers. However, in this case the binary opposition of the colonizer and colonized is reversed: “at the emotional core of *A Small Place*’s attack on the white tourist are the same emotions historically directed at blacks by white racists” which are those “of disgust, contempt and anger” (Bouson, 97). From the perspective of the colonized Antiguan, the tourist, a neo-colonizer, is put in the position of inferior and then rebuked:

... it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you, that behind their doors they laugh at your strangeness ... the physical sight you does not please them; you have bad manners ... they do not like the way you speak (you have an accent); they collapse helpless from laughter, mimicking the way they imagine you must look as you carry out some everyday bodily function. They do not like you. They do not like me! (SP, 17).

The narrator of Kincaid’s memoir aims at making the American/European tourist see the history of colonial history and discourse from the perspective of the exploited, oppressed, and colonized beings rather than from that of the ‘superior’ colonizer West. As Bouson acknowledges: “Returning white contempt with black countercontempt and dissecting whites under black eyes, Kincaid’s speaker inferiorizes the white colonizers” (100). Before setting foot in Antigua, the tourist addressed as “you” in the memoir, regards Antigua as “*A Small Place*, insignificant, empty of history and identity” (Leon, 123). Yet, by making the ‘you-tourist’ look behind the myth of Antigua as a touristic place, Kincaid’s narrator deconstructs the colonizer’s gaze and debunks the colonizer’s perception of Antigua whose existence matters only as a place for the tourist’s enjoyment.

However, it should also be noted that Kincaid, while reversing the privileged position of the European/American supremacists and reducing them to the level of humiliation, does not exalt or glorify the native Antiguan. Although Antigua is an independent country and not a colony anymore, it is not free from the colonizers’ hegemony. According to Kincaid, economic and social exploitation, corruption, poverty and illiteracy are prevalent on every level of daily life in Antigua and the Antiguan are just drifted off to sleep and passivity. In postcolonial Antigua, the narrator tells to the tourist, there are various signposts scattered throughout the country, and the Antiguan, rather than eradicating the ubiquitous colonial traces and constructing a new Antigua, have internalized the colonialism and thus have been objectified. Kincaid’s speaker asks the you-tourist:

Have you ever wondered to yourself why it is that all people like me seem to have learned from you is how to imprison and murder each other, how to govern badly, and how to take the wealth of our country and place it in Swiss bank accounts? Have you ever wondered why it is that all we seemed to have learned from you is how to corrupt our societies and how to be tyrants? (SP, 34).

The Antiguan have internalized the images that are imposed on them over time and thus they have been turned into the subjects of the colonial power which has reduced them to the status of an object. Thus, the Antiguan are constructed as an image, not as real people with their own distinct history but rather as a construction of the white man. As Fanon emphasizes:

Every colonized people - in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality - finds itself face to face

with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle (9).

Kincaid's narrator expounds on how colonialism has been internalized by the colonized, and how the native Antiguan have learned to mimic and imitate their oppressors. Therefore, by denouncing not only the tourist but also the Antiguan, Kincaid seems to offer that instead of being subjected to the objectifying gaze of colonial recognition, Antiguan, the colonized subjects, should first reject the politics of recognition imposed on them by the colonizers and only then they should initiate the process of self-recognition which will result in a shift from being object to subject.

In A Small Place, each of the four sections is narrated through the constant change in tone and voice as well as the various levels of narrative elements in order to deconstruct the gaze of the colonial and imperial hegemony which is represented by the tourist. As a result of these shifts in voice and focus in narration, Giovanna Covi likens Kincaid's memoir to "a jazz composition played on various instruments – always the same themes – but developed in multiple voices and variations" (32). In the first part of the memoir, Kincaid attacks the hegemony of tourism for being responsible for the perpetuation of the colonial discourse on both Antigua and the native Antiguan. Through her narrative strategy Kincaid, as Keith Byerman observes, "establishes her authority by speaking in the second person to the 'tourist,' which allows her to characterize the audience and its voice in the text" (qtd. in Mcleod, 88).

Kincaid starts narrating her memoir by addressing the tourist directly, as one who after leaving the airport of Antigua feels "cleansed," "blessed," and then finally "free." (SP, 5). Throughout the narration, Kincaid refers to the North American or European tourist in the second person only to make them look at Antigua through the eyes of the native Antiguan. The tourist, thus, is obliged to focalize the colonial discourse from the perspective of the colonized subjects. As Monica Fludernik states: "More frequently, second person narrative concentrates on providing in-depth- focalization through the eyes of the you-protagonist" (50). In describing the island to the tourist, Kincaid's narrator uses the voice and perspective of both the tourist and the native Antiguan. By including this double voice technique and both points of views through the first section of the memoir, the narrator presents this section intradiegetically.

The narrator in the first section of the memoir takes the tourist to a brief tour of Antigua and shows them the side of Antigua which they would not be able to find in the travel guides for tourists. The tourist is made to focalize the landscape through the eyes of the native colonized Antiguan. From the white western perspective, the tourist might think "What a beautiful island Antigua is – more beautiful than any of the other islands" (SP, 3) that they have ever seen. Then, as the tourist is looking forward to spending his/her holiday in Antigua where there is a dry climate and it is always sunny, rainfall would be the least favourable thing that he/she would want to happen. The tourist has spent "hard and cold and dark and long days ... in North America (or, worse Europe)" (SP, 4) in order to make money and thus now he/she deserves to have some days just for pleasure on this paradise-like island. On the way to the hotel, the tourist is made to compare the things they see with those in Europe or North America. The taxi driver is hasty and incautious, does not obey the traffic rules and the road is in need of repair. The school the tourist is passing by looks like some latrines, the hospital is dilapidated and even Antiguan themselves have no trust in the doctors there and high officials in government go to New York to get medical treatment. The tourist regards the island and the native Antiguan as holiday attractions yet by reversing this gaze, Kincaid reduces the tourist to the level of humiliation and dehumanization.

Reversing this colonial gaze, Kincaid's narrator coerces the tourist from North America or especially Europe to confront the atrocities and brutalities that their ancestors have committed in the colonial times. The tourist is made to see "the road sign, a rusting, beat-up thing left over from colonial days" (SP, 6), and the sign placed on the library after it got damaged in the Earthquake, on which it writes "THIS BUILDING WAS DAMAGED IN THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1974. REPAIRS ARE PENDING" (SP, 9). Although the tourist's (neo-colonizer's) gaze constantly concentrates on the paradise-like Antigua and its myth-like landscape, Kincaid's narrator turns that gaze into "that of a person who is incapable of thinking" (Covi, 33). That gaze is reversed to negotiate the colonial history and make the tourist question how the West came to get economically powerful:

You have brought your own books with you, and among them is one of those new books about economic history, one of those books explaining how the West ... got rich: the West got rich not from the free ... and then undervalued labour, for generations, of the people like me you see walking around you in Antigua but from the ingenuity of small shopkeepers in Sheffield and Yorkshire and Lancashire... you needn't let that slightly funny feeling you have from time to time about exploitation, oppression, domination develop into full-fledged unease, discomfort; you could ruin your holiday. They are not responsible for what you have; you owe them nothing; ... if it were not for you, they would not have the Government House, and Prime Minister's Office, and Parliament Building and embassy of powerful country (SP, 9-10).

The narrator, after negotiating the discourse of colonialism with the tourist, and coercing him to confront his/her presence on the island as an extension of colonialism, treats them "as an object of contempt" (Bouson, 97). The narrator, by shifting the binaries and dehumanizing the white gaze, makes the tourist see himself/herself through the gaze of the native Antiguan: "But the banality of your own life is very real to you; it drove you to this extreme, spending your days and your nights in the company of people who despise you, people you do not like really, people you would not want to have as your actual neighbor" (SP, 18). According to Kincaid's narrator, the native Antiguan do not like the tourist and so view him/her with contempt and disgust, yet on the other hand, they also envy him/her: "When the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself" (SP, 19).

In the second section of the memoir, the narrator focuses on the history of English colonial rule in Antigua by also incorporating some autobiographical elements into the narration. She switches between two voices while focalizing the colonial process; the first voice belongs to her younger self, that is when she was living in Antigua in the past, and the second voice is from what she has become now – angry and frustrated because of having been deprived of her mother tongue and homeland by the English. In that section, the intradiegetic narrator addresses the tourist in an accusatory tone because the tourist stands as a representative of colonial hegemony, she, on the other hand, adopts an extradiegetic voice of the authoritative narrator when she explains the colonial history of Antigua and throughout this section these two voices are intertwined.

According to Kincaid's narrator, the Antigua she grew up in is quite different from the Antigua seen by the tourist now, "partly for the usual reason, the passing of time, and partly because the bad-minded people who used to rule over it, the English, no longer do so" (SP, 23). In the extradiegetic narrative voice, the narrator accuses the English of the atrocities and cruelties they did for the sake of colonialism:

... they should never have left their home, their precious England, a place they loved so much, a place they had to leave but could never forget. And so everywhere they went they

turned it into England; and everybody they met they turned into English. But no place could ever really be England, and nobody who did not look like them would ever be English, so you can imagine the destruction of people and land that came from that (SP, 24).

By reversing the colonizer's gaze, Kincaid's narrator turns the crimes the English committed during the colonial period into "a sort of original sin for which there is no forgiveness" (Laforest, 203). The English, according to the narrator, gave the streets of Antigua names such as Horatio Nelson who was one of the marine murderers and in Antigua the native people were ruled by English laws imposed on them. Furthermore, some colonial institutions such as the Barclays Bank, the owners of which, the Barclays brothers, were slave traders who used to and still continue to exploit the native Antiguans, are present in Antigua as representative of colonial legacy. In addition, the Mill Reef Club which was founded by North Americans to spend their vacations in Antigua excluded the native Antiguans and the Antiguans, only as servants, had the chance to enter there. Besides English and North Americans, the narrator also refers to a dentist from Czechoslovakia who fled to Antigua from Hitler, and a headmistress from North Ireland who could not stand even the sight of the Antiguans and treated them in a racist way. Because of such racist colonial hegemony in Antigua, the narrator, by deconstructing the tourist's gaze, shows him/her how the "Antiguans were segregated in their own country" (Laforest, 206) and how the native Antiguans, and Antigua itself, as a result of being deprived of their real identity and history by the English colonizers, have been constructed and defined in relation to the English colonizers. Antigua, thus, becomes the margin of the centre, England, and it fails to have a real identity:

What was not England, was destroyed in the process of colonization, leaving behind a vacant, peripheral space that could be defined as "not-England" but not as a place with its own political or social distinctiveness, cultural history, or position of cultural centrality. Kincaid's use of language becomes a rhetorical device to paint a picture of emptiness. The rhetorical structure of Kincaid's writing and her use of the second-person are deliberately alienating creating an ambivalence even on the national home front. Rather than bringing the reader into the text, the accusatory "you" functions to preserve a text-reader distance (McLeod, 82).

Kincaid's intradiegetic narrator expounds on how, while she was growing up, everything revolved around England and how, through England, she met the world. As one of the millions of the colonized subjects who were made orphans by the English, the narrator is deprived of her mother tongue and thus is only able to focalize the world through English, the colonizers' language, which "cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation" (SP, 32) that she has been exposed to. However, by reversing the discourse of binary opposition of colonizer/colonized the narrator "sets out to humiliate the humiliator" (Bouson, 99). The narrator tells us that they, the native Antiguans, thought that the small-minded, racist colonizers were below human standards and were animal-like, and thus they inferiorized them: "We felt superior, for we were so much better behaved and we were full of grace, and these people were so badly behaved and they were so completely empty of grace" (SP, 30). Kincaid's narrator thus subverts the superiority of the white tourist and treats the colonizer's presence in Antigua with contempt: "As for what we were like before we met you, I no longer care. ... Even if I really came from people who were living like monkeys in trees, it was better to be that than what happened to me, what I became after I met you" (SP, 37).

In the third section of the memoir, the narrator compares the colonial history of Antigua with Antigua in the present time, a time in which Antigua has gained its independence from the British Empire. The intradiegetic narrator, in this part of text, asks the white tourist if they can

envisage the feelings she had when, one day, on Market street, she asked himself: "Is the Antigua I see before me, self-ruled, a worse place than what it was when it was dominated by the bad-minded English and all the bad-minded things they brought with them?" (SP, 41). In this part, the intradiegetic voice continues to attack the colonial heritage Antigua had got from England and tourism which is responsible for the perpetuation of this colonial heritage. She, also, denounces the corruption and mimicking of colonialism in post-independent Antigua.

The internal voice of the narrator shows the nostalgia she is feeling for the past of Antigua yet at the same time anger at the colonial hegemony on the island. She is nostalgic of the old library which has been displaced and then replaced with a small one in a dilapidated building above the dry-goods store. She is frustrated at the young, illiterate Antiguan and surprised at "how," unlike the people of her generation, "stupid they seemed, how unable they were to answer in a straightforward way, and in their native tongue of English, simple questions about themselves." (SP, 44). Although the narrator situates herself as one of the Antiguan in the first part of the memoir while addressing the tourist: "we Antiguan, for I am one" (SP, 8), she, later, explicitly distances herself from them: "I look at this place (Antigua), I look at these people (Antiguan), and I cannot tell whether I was brought up by, or so come from, children, eternal innocents, or artists who have not yet found eminence in a world too stupid to understand, or lunatics who have made their own lunatic asylum, or an exquisite combination of all three" (SP, 57). Even though the narrator attacks and denounces the hegemony of Western colonialism, tourism and oppression in Antigua from the perspective of Antiguan, as she herself is one of them, in both an internal and external voice, she keeps herself distanced from both the colonized and the colonizer and thus "sets up an insurmountable barrier between the categories of North Atlantic tourist and Antiguan local while simultaneously positioning herself outside of this binary" (Schroder, 126).

In this section of the memoir, the narrator, by keeping herself distanced from the Antiguan and referring to the Antiguan as "they," shifts her tone and adopts an external and impersonal voice in order to disclose to the North American or European tourist how the Antiguan "made the degradation and humiliation of their daily lives into their own tourist attraction" (SP, 69). With this external, impersonal voice, the narrator expounds how corruption has pervaded and become commonplace in the administration of the Antiguan government and how some ministers and other corrupt businessmen from other nationalities have been into illegal business transactions. According to the narrator, in Antigua the corruption in the government is so rampant that some ministers have their own businesses and their customer is the government and the acquaintances of the Prime Minister of Antigua manage the prostitution house. Besides, Antigua is filled with gambling casinos and off-shore banks which deal with drug-trafficking. The same Prime Minister has been ruling the country for twenty five of thirty years after Antigua got its independence. The opposition parties are accused of being Communists and receiving money from Fidel Castro and Muammar Qaddafi.

While the misgovernment and corruption are so commonplace in their post-colonial country, the external impersonal voice asserts that, the native Antiguan, in their small world, are unable to "see themselves in a larger picture" and "see that they can be part of a chain or something, anything" (SP, 52), and for them "the division of Time into the Past, the Present, and the Future does not exist" (SP, 54). Not having the concept of the division of time in their minds, the people in Antigua speak of slavery and emancipation as if they happened very recently and celebrate the Hotel Training School, a representative of neo-colonialism on the island, which was established to educate Native Antiguan to be servants and thus they are unable to "see a relationship between their obsession with slavery and emancipation and their celebration of the Hotel Training school ... people cannot see a relationship between their obsession with slavery and emancipation and the fact that they are governed by corrupt men, or that these corrupt men

have given their country away to corrupt foreigners” (SP, 55). As their identities are defined in relation to the English colonizers, they seem to have a lack of awareness into their own distinct history and thus, rather than being free and independent subjects, they have internalized colonialism and thus they are turned into the subjects of the colonial power.

In the last section of the memoir, which is in the form of an epilogue, the narrator adopts an omniscient point of view and likens Antigua’s beauty to that of a prison “as if everything and everybody inside it were locked in and everything and everybody that is not inside it were locked out” (SP, 79). As Giovanna Covi states, the prison-like beauty of Antigua, in the last part of the memoir, becomes “the oxymoron of post-colonialism, a situation that is often one of freedom received as a gift from the enemy, rather than won”(38). Having been granted independence and freedom, the Antiguan, under the colonial and imperial gaze, have been objectified and thus, reduced to bodies without intellect. Fanon, in *Black Skin White Masks*, says: “There is not an open conflict between white and black. One day, the White Master, without conflict, recognized the Negro slave” (169). Just like what Fanon suggests in black - white relationship, Kincaid wants the Antiguan (old slaves) to make themselves recognized by the Western colonial powers and only then, she suggests, will they be able to retain their humanity and become subjects again: “Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him” (Fanon, 168).

Antigua is not a colony anymore and its people are free now, yet the beauty of it seems to be unreal just like it was unreal when the Antiguan were slaves. According to the omniscient narrator, when the Antiguan were slaves in the past they were “noble and exalted people” (SP, 80), and when the English were masters they were “human rubbish from Europe” (SP, 80). Only when the English stop being a master and when slaves have their freedom, do they cease to be human rubbish or noble and exalted and instead they both become just ordinary human beings. Thus, what the omniscient narrator offers us in the last section is just “a spectacle of ordinariness ... not a spectacle at all, but simply a place” (Gauch, 918).

Throughout the text, the narrator’s voice shows contempt for not only the North American or European white tourist whose presence on the island stands for the neo-colonial hegemony but also for Native Antiguan who, instead of initiating a process of self-recognition, are indulged in emulating the neo-colonial discourse imposed on them. Therefore, as Mcleod says:

the mutually antagonistic voices that Kincaid uses in the text create a space in which the mythical identity of Antigua is both upheld and debunked. *A Small Place* is both a call to arms and a cry of frustration that aims to strip Antigua of its glamorous taint of tourism, thereby exposing the island’s crumbling infrastructure, unmasking neo-colonial facades and allowing for the rebuilding of a nation. To accomplish this task, Kincaid re-mythologizes Antigua and creates a national identity for the island by slowly destroying the myth of Antigua as a temporary landscape that exists for the use of a visiting hegemony, a myth created by the colonizers and neo-colonialists to promote tourism (80).

In her memoir thus Kincaid addresses the tourist who is an extension of colonialism in the second person and then attacks the colonial point of view he/she holds towards Antigua according to which Antigua exists only as a place for the tourist's (colonizer's) pleasure. Through her narrating strategy of changing voices, tones and points of views in the memoir, Kincaid first negotiates and then redefines Antiguan colonial history and identity from a decolonial perspective.

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