

“Cultural Amnesia and Destabilization of Identity in Santha Rama Rau’s By Any Other Name”

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Cultural Amnesia and Destabilization of Identity in Santha Rama Rau's "By Any Other Name"

Santha Rama Rau's "By Any Other Name" is an excerpt taken from her memoir "Gift of Passage" (1961). The author provides the reader with a glimpse of then India under the dominance of the British Empire. The advent of the British Empire to India and their subsequent rule has rather exceptionally shaped the development of Indian English Literature around the discourse of post-colonial literature.

The colonizers adopted ideologies to colonize the minds of the natives by modifying and re-designing the natives' habits, customs and languages, a consequent marginalization of the native tradition. The imperialists intended for the creation of a hybrid identity of the native, which is described in T.B Macaulay's famous "Minute" of 1835 as-

"We must do our best to form a class of persons; Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect"

Santha Rama Rau's memoir 'By Any Other Name' is a prolific piece of literature where the author expresses the poignant experience of two young girls, Santha and Premila. Santha illuminates she and her sister in the form of memory that she endured as a five and a half year old and Premila as an eight year old.

The British colonial empire asserted the creation of a homogenized identity in order to exercise their influence over the colonized native people. The colonial masters established stereotypes and often destabilized the identity of their native subjects by creating a hybridized identity and a sense of loss and erasure of native culture and tradition.

This paper aims to navigate the ways colonial forces can lead to cultural amnesia and destabilization of identity. It further highlights the erasure of one's native identity by the means of enforced assimilation. Although the characters in the story, the paper also seeks to analyze deeply the personal struggle due to the complex amalgamation arising from cultural alienation. I contemplate the study by reflecting on the enduring relevance of the story by a dissection of the challenges faced in post-colonial societies through a comprehensive understanding of the characters' anguish and ordeal.

Destabilized Identity and Cultural Amnesia presented in "By Any Other Name"

The author Santha Rama Rau begins the memoir by recounting an event that left a profound imprint in the latter part of her life. She and her elder sister Premila were newly admitted to an

Anglo-Indian Day School in Zorinabad, after their father, who is a civil service officer, assumed his duty duties at the headquarters of the town , which she described as “the steamy little provincial town”. On the very first day of school, the headmistress of the school, who has remarkably spent over 15 years in India, is unable to make herself familiar with Indian names or perhaps is ignorant and does not bother to put efforts into pronouncing Indian names correctly. Hence, she chooses to give Westernized names to the girls for her convenience ,thus she manifests. This alternative identity for them. This can be observed when she says,

“Oh my dears, those are very much too hard for me. Suppose we give you pretty English names. Wouldn't that be jolly? Lets see now- Pamela for you . I think ... That's as close as I can get. And for you “ how about Cynthia? Isn't that nice?

This attitude of the headmistress heightens the proximity of the colonizers' outlook towards the natives. The colonial masters positioned themselves in a superior position and deprived the native people of their basic identity. As Homi Bhaba discusses this concept in “Of Mimicry and Man”, he argues that the colonizers are focused on creating a homogeneous identity of the native man by ‘mimicking’ their colonial masters. They advocate a monolithic identity and reject the idea of dualism . The colonizers subverted the native subjects by disrupting the identity of the natives, their reason, logic, in order to ensure a continuing colonial dominance.

Homi Bhaba has forwarded a very interesting interpretation regarding this feature Eurocentricism which broadens the understanding of the role the colonial discrimination, ‘Universalism does not merely end with a view of an immanent “spiritual” meaning produced in the text. It also interpellates, for its reading, a subject positioned at the point where conflict and difference resolve and all ideology ends. It is not that the Transcendental subject cannot see historical conflict or colonial differences as mimetic structures or themes in the text. What it cannot conceive, is how it is itself structured ideologically and discursively in relation to those processes of signification which do not then allow for the possibility of whole or universal meanings.’ ([Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse’, in October 28, Spring, 1984; rep. as The Location of Culture, Chap. 4.

The author becomes disillusioned by her dual identity that prevails by her new name “Cynthia” given by her headmistress. She refuses to mend her ways with this hybrid identity and starts feeling detached and amnesic because of the newly constructed identity. This is highlighted by

the fact that Santha refuses to tell her name when the teacher asks her to introduce herself to the class. She points out this incident as,

“I can’t remember too much about the proceedings in that class that day, except for the beginning. The teacher pointed to me and asked me to stand up.

Now dear, tell the class your name...

I said nothing.

Come along...she said,frowning slightly, What’s your name dear?”

I don’t know. I said finally.”

A complex feeling of detachment is felt by the author. She refuses to accept herself as “Cynthia” and feels dissociated.

Apparently, the norms of control at the centre tests, rejects and appropriates identity and those at the periphery are sufferers and treated as inferior at the hands of the power structure. The post-colonial theory posits the domain of identity as something relating to our self –recognition. It reflects our essential association woven around cultural imaginaries which set the goals, aspirations and certain features and behavioral norms of the community.

Homi Bhaba in “The Locations of Culture” describes cultural differences and the West’s non-regard for the binary culture in the following manner ,

‘The enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the binary division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address. It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic.’ (The Locations of Culture, 1994)

Adding a provision in this regard by inference to the disillusionment of self-identity of the protagonist Antoinette in Jean Rhys's “Wide Sargasso Sea”(1996). The protagonist, Antonittee Cosway , a Creole heiress ,is married to an Englishman in the novel called Mr. Rochester. Her husband creates a sense of conflicted identity and cultural alienation by re-naming her as “Bertha”. Mr. Rochester disenfranchised his wife of her Jamaican cultural roots. Moreover, he marginalizes her existence by declaring her mentally unstable and imprisoning her in an attic.

The colonizers' efforts to evade the native cultural identity creates a hostile atmosphere, a sense of unbelonging in their native homeland. Thus imbalance of power perpetuates between the colonizers and the colonized due to the continuous struggle to dominate and resist by the respective forces. In fact, Santha and Premila's mother was quite reluctant about sending them to a British –run Indian school, as she could be seen saying “you can bury a dog's tail for seven years and it still comes out curly, and you can take a Britisher away from his home for a lifetime and he still remains insular.” This invariably displays a tone of anguish on the part of the authors' mother as she seems to be well aware of the ways the Britishers indictment towards Indian children. The colonial master's strategic discriminatory movements made towards the non-representation of the natives in any institutional or social space left a feeling of nostalgia in the minds of the native Indians. It is worth noting when the author mentions that there were only nearly 40 students of Indian origin in the whole school. The school building was designed in an Indian architectural style “with wide verandas opening onto a central courtyard” but was painted in the style of traditional British schools with dark brown colors that had mats on the floors instead of the usual white-washed and stone-floored Indian schools. A longing for the past because of blurring of history and cultural displacement is quite commonly experienced by the colonized, making them refugees in their indigenous homeland.

Furthermore, the author and seem to be going through cultural amnesia when the tiffins of the students in the school had sandwiches instead of the traditional chapatti. The narrator's elder sister is even seen requesting her mother to give them sandwiches to school as well, in an effort to assimilate with her fellow classmates.

However, we notice a sudden change in the attitude of Premila towards the end of the excerpt. A visible resistance is portrayed as Premila bursts into anger and refuses to surrender to the engulfing discrimination due to their racial or ethnic conformity. Santha recalled that a week later, when both sisters were at school ,Premila barged into Santha's classroom and told her-
“Get up. We are going home. Bring your pencils and your notebook”

The use of the word “home” in a loose metaphorical way depicts a free and more independent abode that the colonized people desire to achieve by reclaiming their native homeland, which the colonizers dissuade them to rekindle.

A carefree and unbothered Premila told Santha “We are going home for good” when Santha tried to enquire what the matter was.

Finally, Premila and Santha reached home after a long and tiring walk back home from school in the scorching heat of summer. On encountering them at such an unusual hour of the day, when they were supposed to be at school, their mother became worried and asked what happened to Premila, to which she answered,

“We had a test today, and made me and other Indians sit at the back of the room, with a desk between each other”. The mother tried to comprehend more about the intimidating incident by asking, “Why was that ,darling?” Premila answered, “She said it was because Indians cheat. So, I don’t think we should go back to that school. Here, the mother, however, emerges as a champion. She understands the sensibility of the situation and the trauma it might have on the girls; she invariably agrees to Premila, saying,

“, of course, not darling in displeasure,”

The pathetic plight of discrimination based on the social identity of the little girl is enough to self-denigrate an individual's worth. The European colonial abuse , and consolidated the racial discrimination faced by an ordinary Indian. The colonizers are often blind to the sufferings of the natives , they lack empathy for the colonized people and degrade them by stripping off basic human dignity ,humiliating them to a level of dehumanization only to assert their authority over them.

Edward Said argues in his text “Orientalism” that the imperialist forces stereotype the natives as unworthy , delicate or indolent people. He demonstrates how their texts represent the Western as superior, masculine, strong and placing themselves as the rational protector upon which the natives can rely .

“No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which, if followed into actual experience for only a moment, are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuity of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival, in fact, is about the connections between things; in Eliot’s phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the “other echoes

[that] inhabit the garden.” It is more rewarding - and more difficult - to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about “us.” But this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterating how “our” culture or country is number one (or not number one, for that matter).”

Having said that, towards the end, the narrator is seen overhearing the conversation between his elder sister and their mother, where they were discussing if the five whether-year-old little Santha had understood the depth of the horrifying experience. To this, Premila reassured her mother that Santha was still too young to comprehend the discrimination faced by them. However, such is not the case with Santha, this very episode had such a deep imprint on the writers’ minds that it came into the expression of a memoir in her later life. Events like the one mentioned rarely get erased from an individual’s memory, they lurk in the mind like a painful nightmare which haunts them for the rest of their life.

Conclusion:

Above all, in conclusion, it can be affirmed that Santha Rama Rau’s “By Any Other Name” skillfully portrays a clash of identity and culture in a colonized setting of then British-ruled India .The colonial power dynamics of oppression and erasure of cultural authenticity delves into complex myriad challenges for the two sisters, Santha and Premila .

The phenomenal subjugation of the sisters’ forced assimilation corrosion to the standards of Western norms, the brazen disregard of their Indian names and ensuing new Westernized names for them is a corroboration and testimony of augmented maltreatment of Indians under the European colonial pedigree in general. Rama Rau’s narrative technique ushers the impact of colonialism on individuals within the dichotomy of a post-colonial society . She attempts to encapsulate the struggle to resonate with the prototype of the manufactured colonial identity.

The story’s gripping relevance in the post-colonial communities and individuals overstates a promising insight into the challenges and hardships endured by them during colonial rule.It serves as a cautionary tale about the importance of fostering cultural heritage and preserving ethnic identity. Additionally, it also underscores the relevance of a throbbing inclusive society which rejects the norms of social segregation and discrimination based on gender, race and identity.

Conforming to the need for diversity and inclusivity, “By Any Other Name” renders as a poignant tale of embracing human identity and celebrating multifaceted individuals, which

suffers to illustrate the issues of harmony , social empathy and commitment towards their own culture.

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