
Culture and Identity in A Small Place

From the point of view of a reader, it is clear that Jamaica Kincaid is not satisfied with the way Antigua is now. By comparing pre-colonial Antigua with colonial and post-colonial Antigua, Kincaid creates a novel that is anti-tourist and questions whether the island was better off in pre-colonial times or how it is now. In the first section of the novel, Kincaid describes to the reader the beauty of the island without going into the harsh way that the natives live their lives. She tells this part from the hypothetical view of a tourist, but eventually ends the section by discussing how much she dislikes tourists. The second section describes the old Antigua, while it was in the colonial possession of Great Britain. The third section finds Kincaid questioning whether times were better in the old days or how they are today. The fourth section closes out the book with a comparison of the 'mixed blessing' the people on the island are living with: they are surrounded by the immense beauty of a tropical island in the Caribbean, only to find themselves stricken with poverty and unsuitable living conditions. Kincaid's point of view on culture and history reflect how many Caribbean and Antiguan people feel: that the living conditions they are faced with now are much different from how they used to be.

Kincaid's view in *A Small Place* reflects a Caribbean perspective, which is one of disgust towards the Europeans. While they felt as if they were doing the natives a favor by coming in and teaching them their culture, Kincaid believes that the Europeans stripped many Caribbean's of their culture, including the Antiguans. She believes that the culture of Antigua has been taken away from them, and other Caribbean islanders feel the same way about their land. The culture that they once had and the understanding of the native rituals of their island are long gone, having been replaced by the ideas of the Europeans.

In the first section, Kincaid starts off from the point of view of a tourist, and shows readers how they would view the island. "As you're plane descends to land, you might say, what a beautiful island Antigua is." [4] Kincaid shows from a tourists point of view that the island is extremely beautiful. However, within the beauty of the island is the true life of the natives that live there, and the poverty and poor living conditions that they are faced with. A native sees the island differently because they have to live there and they deal with it everyday, while a tourist comes in and sees the island for the first time. The tourist views the island as a paradise, a type of getaway from the regular troubles of their native land.

"Every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere. Every native everywhere lives a life of overwhelming and crushing banality and boredom and desperation and depression, and every deed, good and bad, is an attempt to forget this. Every native would like to find a way out, every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour.

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But some natives -- most natives in the world -- cannot go anywhere. They are too poor. They are too poor to go anywhere. They are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go -- so 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." [18-19]

The reader is able to better understand how the natives live their lives and, from a cultural point of view, can see that the Caribbean way of living is disrespectful of their culture. They live in poverty and their culture has been stripped from them, and they are now forced to live in a world where European influence has taken over.

The second section sees Kincaid going back to the old Antigua, during the colonial possession. She briefly remembers the unquestioning obedience of Antigua to England and their culture. From a cultural point of view, we now see how England stripped Antiguan of their culture and their morals, being able to 'mold' them, in a sense, into the people they wanted them to be. This was often the case for many Caribbean countries once they were colonized.

"Do you ever try to understand why people like me cannot get over the past, cannot forgive and cannot forget? There is the Barclay's Bank. The Barclay brothers are dead. The human beings they traded, the human beings who to them were only commodities, are dead. . . . So do you see the queer thing about people like me? Sometimes we hold your retribution."

Kincaid accuses the British colonial system of trading humans and turning them into another item instead of an actual human being. Kincaid can't 'forgive and forget' because there is no way to neither forgive nor forget how slavery affected people.

In the third section, Kincaid questions whether things were better in the old days or how they are now. She uses the library as an example of this:

"If you could hear the sound of [the old library's] quietness . . . , the smell of the sea . . . , the heat of the sun . . . , the beauty of us sitting there like communicants at an altar . . . , the fairy tale of how we met you, your right to do the things you did . . . you would see why my heart would break at the dung heap that now passes for a library in Antigua."

The library used to be a majestic place where people would enjoy spending their time. However, it is now temporarily located above a dry goods store, while it is awaiting repairs. Members of the Mill Reef Club have funds to help restore the library, but they will only give money if it is completely rebuilt. Kincaid believes that this has more to do with trying to remember the colonial regime than trying to actually help.

In the last section, Kincaid says that the beauty of the island is a 'mixed blessing' to the

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natives, who are surrounded by beauty but trapped in poverty.

“It is as if, then, the beauty—the beauty of the sea, the land, the air, the trees, the market, the people, the sounds they make—were a prison, and as if everything and everybody inside it were locked in and everything and everybody that is not inside it were locked out. And what might it do to ordinary people to live in this way every day? What might it do to them to live in such heightened, intense surroundings every day?”

Kincaid believes that the slaves who were brought to the island were victims and considered them honorable, but their descendants and the people who live in Antigua today are merely simple human beings. Europeans believed that colonizing these countries would give them a sense of hope and open them up to new cultures. However, Kincaid believes that the culture of Antigua was stripped from them with the arrival of the English. From a cultural and historical point of view, the Antiguan culture and sense of history was taken from them. The natives live in a beautiful country but are faced with poverty everyday. From an outsiders point of view, the country is beautiful. However, from someone who is a native to the island, it is a place without culture or beauty.

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