literary studies conference

AMERICAN DREAMING: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF AMERICA IS NOT THE HEART

Jamelle Frances A. Realin

College of Teacher Education, University of Northern Philippines
jamellerealin21@gmail.com

Abstract

Elaine Castillo's America is not the Heart (2018) gives a vivid description of how colonialism operates within the individual psyche, where we draw our own personal identity and perceptions of others and the world. It presents issues of othering defined by Tyson (2006) as a psychological operation on which colonialist ideology depends and that is its unmistakable landmark, which consists of subjugating an alien people by reinforcing that they must be othered. This paper analyzes the issues of orientalism, otherness, language, and hybridity that challenge the Filipino immigrants in California—emphasizing that the postcolonial condition is fractured, unstable, and hybrid. It provides evidence to the role of postcolonialism in understanding why power, identity, and culture are lost when a group of people is dominated by a conquering force. In addition, it discusses how colonial domination has seeped into the inner local system and divided the nation into classes, allowing the rich and powerful freedom to demonstrate superiority toward their significant "other"—the underprivileged. Moreover, it explores the survival techniques of postcolonial immigrants. It also tackles the different responses and ideologies that make up their identities—and the reasons why they are unstable and multifaceted, proving that immigrants have indelible ties to their cultural and geographical roots, that immigrants have in fact this cultural baggage that do not necessarily interfere in their lives but instead fuel their motivations.

***Keywords**: America Is Not the Heart; American dream; Filipino immigrant diaspora*

A. Introduction

The ideology behind colonialism is inescapably connected to psychology because colonial psychology sustains it. As *America Is Not the Heart* (2018) illustrates, colonialism operates within the individual psyche, where we draw our own personal identity and perceptions of others and the world. By considering this, we can use *America Is Not the Heart* as a text about othering, defined by Tyson (2006) as "a psychological operation on which colonialist ideology depends and is its unmistakable hallmark". It consists of subjugating an alien people by manipulating them into believing that they are inferior, and must be othered. This paper will attempt to analyze the issues of orientalism, otherness, language, and hybridity that challenge the Filipino immigrants in California—emphasizing that the postcolonial condition is fractured, unstable, and hybrid.

In addition, it will uncover the reasons behind second generation children's detachment from their native language, why they seem to live half of their life in that foreign land and the other half in their mother country. In other words, it will provide evidence to the role of postcolonialism in understanding why power, identity, and culture are lost when a group of people is dominated by a conquering force. It will discuss how colonial domination has seeped into the inner local system and divided the nation

into classes, allowing the rich and powerful freedom to demonstrate superiority toward their significant "other"—the underprivileged. Moreover, it will explore the survival techniques of postcolonial immigrants. It will also tackle the different responses and ideologies that make up their identities—and the reasons why they are unstable and multifaceted, proving that immigrants have indelible ties to their cultural and geographical roots, that immigrants have in fact this cultural baggage that do not necessarily interfere in their lives but instead fuel their motivations.

Present in the novel is the depiction of how American neo-colonialism lies at the backbone of Marcos Martial Law. During the Great Depression, when Martial Law was implemented, many Filipinos immigrated to the West in search for "greener pastures", which shows that ex-colonies' solution to their problems is to immigrate, to leave the country where they were made to feel foreign.

B. Hybridity

The cultural encounter results in the split-consciousness of immigrants' identities—which is explainable by hybridity. This double consciousness is observed in some immigrants' tendency to blur the line between their first language and English and the unconscious internalization of Filipino values, such as using the hand to eat, although they were intentionally raised to be American. As immigrant children, the transition is not distinct. In fact, some are not able to distinguish which is their native language and which is English. This linguistic issue is more observed in non-Manileños.

Paz, the voice of the prologue, uses the concept of baggage as a self-explanation to what hybridity among Filipino immigrants entails. She notes that "[n]o matter how far you go, no matter how many times you immigrate, there are countries in you you'll never leave" (25). This bifurcation of identity experienced by immigrants is represented by those whose Green Cards are still in process—spending half of the year in the Philippines and the other half in California.

C. Orientalism

Orientalism is a term explained by Said (2006, cited in Egoian, 2008), as an academic and political concept that suggests Asian or Middle Eastern stereotypes through the White European lens and its corresponding colonial attitudes.

Noticeable in the presence of Bruha or faith healers in California is the impact of the Spanish colonization, especially the imposition of Catholicism to the lives of Local Witches, who belong to the "other". In the pre-colonial past, faith healers were the primitive doctors. However, they are subject to othering for their showcase of primitive practices such as applying oil to the patient's body and their tendency to generalize every sickness as a result of a mhytical creature's interest or a neighbor's malicious envy. Paz's mother was in fact a well-known bruha in Mangaldan yet she notes that they were all raised Catholic. She maintains that "in [their] family, Catholicism was a simple cult of personality: everything is about the Virgin" (23). Catholicism, for these families, was a tool for survival. It is their practice to kill animals and sprinkle blood around the house that repulses Pol and Hero, who are both raised as upper class children. For Hero, this indifference stems from the fact that they grew up in a family that ridiculed faith healing. Pol, however, has a more philanthropic reason: he believes that faith healers are deluding people, mostly the poor.

One strategy that colonizers capitalize on is to prevent any form of resistance. In the narrative of the New People's Army (NPA), a guerilla force against the Marcos regime, bits of information about the Philippines' colonial history can be gathered and analyzed. Also, through the character of a college student Paz, the reasons why the oppressed fail in creating any forms of resistance are present. Language barriers top the list. During the Martial Law, only Tagalog and English were allowed in schools—disregarding the other local languages. Paz even recounted why she couldn't talk about

Martial Law: she barely understands what the news is about. This language barrier discourages people from being invested in their country's current condition and taking part in any collective struggle.

A righteous anger is displayed through the characters' narratives of their experiences of American crimes, especially the practice of waterboarding during the Philippine-American war. In the novel, there are other snippets of history told by Teresa, the leader of the NPA. Much of these literatures confront the crimes Americans committed during their "civilizing mission" in the Philippines. Perhaps these snippets are what really display and challenge colonization in the novel. These stories were not widely known, which is to say that "tragedy could be unsensational" (251), just like the story behind the University of Sto. Thomas (UST) ghost that appeared before Hero and how the Aetas living near Pinatubo during its eruption never made it to the news in California. We can infer that the problem lies in the lack of media coverage for the natives, those who are at the receiving end of marginalization.

Some of these stories suggest the cruel and discriminating perception of Filipinos through creating negative stereotypes intending to dehumanize and animalize their identity, by stripping away any dignity and defining the Filipino as the "other." It includes the derogatory description of the autopsies of Filipino bodies, labelling them a "rather gruesome dissection" (69) and the claim that "natives were inherently unhealthy, prone to all manner of plagues, cankers, and skin disorders. Worse, there was a danger they would spread their infirmity to whites" (69). These inspired America to enact their civilizing mission, thus employing the water cure in the Philippines, wherein the colonizers put a stick in their mouth to keep it open, and poured a pail of water directly into the mouth and nostrils.

The issues surrounding the Nestlé formula, a campaign which centered on discouraging breastfeeding, is challenged and confronted in the novel, too. Paz witnessed this fad, so when she could afford it in California, she made it her daughter Roni's breakfast staple that went longer than what is prescribed for her age. What Paz did not know is that during the campaign, there were reported deaths because the campaign did not consider that their target market, mostly poor women, may not have access to clean water. In short, what the San Miguel Corporation was imposing is inappropriate to the Filipinos. This practice, apparently, was a holdover from the colonizers.

D. Othering

The idea of segregating individuals, the existence of the "them versus us" mentality, is called "othering". It is connected to racial science, a term which biologically defines unequal and biased explanations of race.

One effect of colonization is the creation of the ex-colonies' negative self-image and alienation from their own cultures. This is because the colonizers constantly devalued and forbid the colonials' from expressing their pre-colonial culture. For Paz, to be foreign to a country is to be born poor in it. This urges her to pursue her dream to go out of the country. In fact, distance is one of Paz's armors for survival, clinging to the belief that the feeling of foreignness in living abroad is more tolerable than the foreignness she experiences in her mother country. Getting her college education in Baguio, she "[hoped] to stay in Baguio, up there in the cool green hills, safe and perfumed" (8). It is interesting to note that Paz seems unaware that this determination is actually a contingency pressured into existence by western hegemonic discourses and their consequences.

The hegemonic discourse of "white citizenship" perceives Asian immigrants as "cultural aliens," birthing various Asian identities, classified according to their relative distance from whiteness, thus encouraging competitive self-differentiation among Asian groups. This explains why even Filipino communities in the diaspora compete with each other. Roni's classmate calling her Igorota, for example, stems from a deeper internalization of this ideology.

It should not be overlooked that Paz's current state, her coping mechanisms, and her way of life in general are products of othering demonstrated by rich Filipinos. Paz is not entirely a passive, unresisting subject to colonial power. She manifests her own form of resistance by capitalizing on the

things that make her feel inferior. This is why she pursued her American Dream, and to America she went. She developed the thinking that having the characteristics of her dementors will serve as "a crucial talisman for [her] survival (8)." If this physical aspect does not succeed in concealing her provincial past—a thing she is ashamed of—she buys expensive things she could not afford.

Having been exposed to the discrimination extended to dark-skinned Filipinos, Paz expects to be immune to larger forms of discrimination by having these talismans. One of these talismans includes being a mestiza. In fact, in her recount of Diego Silang y Andaya's story, she placed much emphasis on his wife, Gabriela, as a "mestiza".

> The mestiza part means they'll definitely make a movie out of her life one day: people remember the mestizas. That [she] is light-skinned enough to pass for mestiza doesn't slip your mind; frankly, you're hanging on to it as a crucial talisman for your survival. You want to be remembered, too. Like a blow across the knuckles. (8)

The representation of beauty is Gabriela, which propels the speculation that anyone who does not have Gabriela's physical characteristics are othered and discriminated. Women, in response, desire to be light-skinned to avoid being at the receiving end of othering and discrimination. It creates a fake notion that being "light-skinned" provides dark-skinned peoples a frail shield against greater forms of discrimination. The psychology behind this thinking is explained by Perez (2017) who stated that "the 'desire to be white' observed amongst Filipino/Ilocano-Hawaiian immigrants is not a mere personal resolve nor a sole act of individual decision. It is an aspiration driven by the ideology of 'white ideal,' the discourse of middle class success." Since cultural values are 'epidermalized' into one's consciousness, creating a rift between the nonwhite people and their body, they become alienated from their own bodies.

To cope, over-romanticizing of the American Dream is born. Paz is proud to give birth to Roni, her American girl, someone she desired to become. She notes "she (Roni) doesn't have to love it (America), she's of it" (30). Paz's tendency to think of western stuff as her talisman is passed down to her daughter, constantly reminding her that "if [she] was born in the Philippines, [they] would both be dead" (30). As a consequence, Roni will grow up believing that she is alive only because she was born in America.

The idea that having the characteristics of the colonizers will allow them to experience a softer mistreatment from the colonizer creates a division among the colonized themselves—dividing the poor and rich and the light-skinned and dark-skinned; hence inspiring discrimination and more display of othering. In fact, the white ideal is often taken to ridiculous lengths by using whitening products to achieve it. Through a judging eye, Hero illustrates this through a description of

> [P]ictures of girls, most of them Filipinas, most of them taken at school dances, some of them by professional photographers, some of them amateur photos. In nearly all of the photos, the color of the girls' faces was completely different from the color of their bodies, the faces ghostly and pinked, like someone had put calamine lotion all over their cheeks, foreheads, chins, while the skin on their neck, arms, decolletage was usually some shade of warm, sheeny brown. The faces looked like they'd been pasted onto the bodies, like the heads belonged to other people entirely. (190)

In addition, Paz copes by buying more expensive foreign products. Paz is the representation of the way most Filipinos deal with post-colonial mentality. Instead of shunning the colonial practices that put her at the inferior side of the coin, she develops the mentality that she needs to own them in order to survive. This is obvious in her attempts to rid herself of the inferiority she harbors by spending her savings to have her healthy tooth pulled and have it replaced with gold tooth—a symbol of status which the underprivileged desire to have. This Filipino value, this spending more than they could afford, is a result of othering. The price of overspending and the need to appear rich is working overtime, as shown by Paz and Pol.

The kid calling Roni Igorota, more specifically shouting "IGOROTA IGOROTA IGOROOOOOTAAAAAAAA" (41), intending to insult, signifies the othering of Igorots. Igorots are often stereotyped as dark-skinned high land dwellers. However, their identity is reduced to being just dark-skinned and savage. It is not only Roni's classmate that sees Roni as someone along those lines. In fact, Hero (Roni's aunt) sees in Roni expressions of "choleric fury", whenever she gets into a fight (41). Hero, tainted by her family's condescending outlook toward dark-skinned people or whom they call Negritos, describes Roni as having animalistic features and actions. She

> [F]elt, uneasily, that she was looking at something not altogether human; the hush of dull rage lifting from the girl's body had something creaturely in it, predatory and wounded, something that knew how to fight and not remotely how to speak. (42)

> [S]he'd seen the girl eat neck bones with relish, gnawing the meat down to the cartilage and then gnawing that, too. She's even seen Roni eat dinuguan—she apparently had a taste for the sabaw, preferring just the dinuguan sauce with rice, leaving the meat and innards for everyone else. At the time, Hero had asked, delicately, if the girl knew what the sauce she was eating was made of. Roni had been amused by Hero's tone. Pig blood, she'd replied, shoveling a spoon of it into her mouth, then grinning with black-stained teeth. Oink oink. (44)

Notice that the description is of Hero's. While her words are effective in its depiction, her prejudiced perception resonates with orientalism. The description is more subtle than how the whites may have described Roni but the resemblance of their thinking is too striking to consider a coincidence. Emphasized again is the connection of class to colonial thinking. Hero may not be an antagonist but this scenario allows for this thinking's scrutiny and confrontation.

What is ironic is that the kid who called Roni "Igorota" has the same skin color as hers. Considering Roni's family's history of being bruhas or faith healers, perhaps the kid intends to criticize that "frowned upon" fact but ends up misusing the term "Igorota" (41). When the news reached Roni's parents, the way Paz took it as a personal offense tells so much about how low the regard Filipinos themselves have for Igorots. In their response to the internalized light-skinned supremacy, they tend to other their fellow Filipinos, which is consistent with the claim that colonial hegemony wreaks wide rifts among colonies, preventing them from forming collective resistance. Their misrepresentation results in the creation of another still-powerful stereotype of the Igorot, to be placed alongside those that classify them as freaks, and weirdos, and savages.

In reference to Rosalyn's experience of pursuing the world of theater, othering, as experienced by immigrants, can be explained through the lines "You moved backstage, where, it turned out, all the Pinay and Vietnamese kids had been hiding the whole time" (279). Rosalyn was never part of the cast, in each play she was always a sidekick just like how ex-colonies were "othered", conveniently positioned to shine the spotlight on the whites.

In direct contrast to the non-privileged, white Filipinos will have it better, as evident in this passage:

> Charmaine was a light-skinned, church-going Filipina, top of the class, whose parents regularly donated to the school, and who often helped the teachers clap the chalkboard erasers after class. In short, Charmaine was one of Mrs. Waverley's more civilized wards—but Roni told Hero later that Charmaine had in fact been one of the most savage fighters, and when one of the shortest boys in the class had his jaw locked around Roni's hand, teeth starting to break the flesh, the taller Charmaine had come up from behind to pick him up by his torso and toss him to the ground

> like a rag doll. […] Mrs Waverley believed Charmaine's story, and because she'd vouched for Roni, was prepared to allow Roni to leave with her. (85)

Perhaps Mrs. Waverley's response to the kids' fight is the only situation in the novel that showed a Westerner marginalizing dark-skinned peoples. Apparently she categorizes her students into "more civilized wards" and "most savage fighters," another display of discrediting dark-skinned peoples. Skin colors are often associated with character: stereotyping dark-skinned as evil and light-skinned as pure. This expectation is foiled by Roni, dark-skinned, when she did not accept Charmaine's vouching for her.

> Come on, Roni, Charmaine singsonged from the doorway to the classroom. Let's go home. Roni said she remained in her chair. She was staring straight ahead at the whiteboard, where I WILL NOT FIGHT DURING RECESS was written in capital letters. I was too part of it, Roni declared, ensuring her suspension. I started it. (86)

Charmaine, light-skinned, was a blatant liar. Roni, dark-skinned, admitted to her mistake. She had her honor.

The practice of othering exists within the ex-colonies, especially upper class individuals. This proves further that colonialism not only affects the individual psyche but the individual psyche fuels colonialism as well. Those that possess the characteristics of the colonizer have successfully mimicked colonial practices.

> After it had been confirmed that the prisoner who spoke Ilocano and said she was only a country doctor was, indeed, a De Vera daughter, and therefore closely related to a family friend and relative through marriage of Marcos, she'd been immediately released from the camp, two years after she'd been taken. Those rumors were, undoubtedly, what had prevented them from raping her, never mind killing her altogether. They'd had reports of a cadre doctor, Ilocana, who might be the missing Geronima De Vera, former medical student at UST, daughter of Benjamin De Vera, niece of Melchior and Apolonio De Vera, friends of Marcos. (93)

Among the things that colonizers shunned the Filipinos for is their celebratory fiestas. Colonizers, with the prejudice that Filipinos are dirty, frowned on the gatherings and feared that they might contaminate the whites. Notable in these celebrations, which immigrants apparently carried with them across the borders, are what Hero noted as the kinds of food which they did not normally eat at home. She notices that in the restaurant ran by Rosalyn's family, no one ate what she normally had at home in Vigan.

E. Language

This portion discusses the ways in which assimilation is used during the Marcos Regime to control the people. Assimilation involves the colonized being forced to conform to the cultures and traditions of the colonizers. Gauri (1988, cited in Southard, 1997) points out that "cultural assimilation [is] … the most effective form of political action" because "cultural domination works by consent and often precedes conquest by force". Colonizing governments realize that they gain strength not necessarily through physical control, but through mental control. This mental control is implemented through a central intellectual location, the school. In Paz's college days, when she narrates the school's situation during the Martial Law, it is obvious that the widespread implementation of Filipino or English Only Policy has taken roots. Students were punished for speaking languages other than Tagalog and

English. However, leniency was offered to privileged students, directing only on the punishment to the underprivileged ones.

Being colonized is one thing but being colonized by a language may bring forth deeper damage to one's consciousness and identity. Along with this is the placement of perfect English grammar in an invisible exclusive bubble, outside it are the "wrong" Englishes. One of its effects is shown in Paz's letter to Pol, attempting to cut their relationship.

> You work on it so long that the letter you end up with bears no resemblance to the letter you intended to write; by taking out so much of your bad grammar, you've taken out most of your feelings too. (21)

Immigrants, especially those who were kids when they immigrated, are symbolic of how the native language is forgotten. Rosalyn recounts that as attempts to erase her accent in English increased, she unavoidably forgot how to speak, even understand it too. As Thiong'o (1981 as cited in Margulis and Nowakoski, 1996), who uses his native language in writing, explains, "English […] is a "cultural bomb" that continues a process of erasing memories of pre-colonial cultures and history and installs the dominance of new, more insidious forms of colonialism."

Along the same vein, Boy and Adela having their own accent for Tagalog which sounds like they have owned it, speaks much of the ways ex-colonials cope with the sudden shift in language. For first generation immigrants, who may probably never lose their accent and have collectively agreed to have their own version of the English language, working in new Englishes can be a therapeutic act of resistance, remaking a colonial language to reflect the postcolonial experience. However, for multilingual immigrants, language can also be the reason for their double-consciousness.

> Hero had the sense that Pol's Ilocano was stuck in time, that he only wanted to speak it with the people he'd always spoken it to, but even when Hero and Pol spoke in Ilocano with each other in California, there was a playacting stiffness in their voices that hadn't been there back in Vigan, when Hero used to hang on his every word. (49)

F. Conclusion

It is important that attention be focused on how ex-colonies react to certain situations for their experiences, their psychological status, might affect their preferences, ideologies, and way of life. Boy Cabugao, for example, has an issue with manga (Japanese Comic Book) because he formerly worked on the American navy base in Cavite, where he probably experienced cruelties from the Japanese and therefore grew indifferent toward anything related to Japan.

Much of the othering in the novel can be drawn from Hero's perspective as the story focuses on her. The holdover racist thinking she has internalized from her parents, which she demonstrates by noting the details that differentiate his past life as a donya in Vigan and now (in America), allows us to problematize it. While her descriptions serve only as an outlet for colonialist attitudes and thinking, its relentless emphasis on the characteristics of those around her hints at a problematic dimension of her attitude toward people different from her. It is in the frequentness of her racist observations that makes her the subject of this paper's criticism. It must be noted that as the story progresses, Hero undergoes character development. Perhaps the peak of this development is when she had

> [G]otten the time difference wrong. She thought the Philippines was sixteen hours behind California, but it was the opposite; the Philippines was sixteen hours ahead. It was with an inchoate shame that she realized she thought the Philippines was behind California because she—well, because she thought that California must be in the future, ahead, and the Philippines in the past, behind. (359)

Hero's character development arises from her exposure to the realities of life—from her experiences as an activist and an immigrant to a place where people from all walks of life interacted and learned from each other. She represents every Filipino who used to be blind to the truth but is now enlightened to it.

Indeed, America Is Not the Heart reveals the ways in which colonial mentality affects the lives of ex-colonials, their ideologies and motivations. It portrays how colonialism takes different forms and how it can happen even without foreign intervention. It presents the roots of colonial mentality and confronts it through the characters.

G. References

Castillo, E. (2018). *America Is Not the Heart*. Atlantic Books.

Egoian, R. (2008). *Elaine Castillo's America Is Not the Heart: What Does It Mean to Be a Filipino Woman?* Chopsticks Alley. https://www.chopsticksalley.com/post/2018/10/14/elaine-castillos-america-is-not-the-heart- what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-filipino-woman

Margulis and Nowakoski (1996). *Language*. https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/21/language/

Perez, M. S. (2017). White Citizenship: A Category of Identification and Route of US Immigrant Constitution. *Kritika Kultura*. 10.13185/KK2017.02813.

Said, E. W. (2003). *Orientalism*. Penguin Classics.

Southard, J. (1997). Colonial Education. *Postcolonial Studies @ Emory*. https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/20/colonial-education/

Tyson, L. (2006). Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide. New York, London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.