

Short Research Article

The Hamilton Case: Colonialism and Diasporic Identities

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Abstract

*As the term diaspora can also be used to think through the intrusion of the colonialism, Michelle de Kretser's *The Hamilton Case* is divided into three parts due to the characters' attitudes towards the West. Sam's positive reflection on colonialism is revealed in his hope to move to the West and struggle to embrace his dream of western metropolis by complying with the British criteria. Jaya's resistant stance motivates him to initiate the country's political independence and ethnic strife to combat colonialism. Shiva resists colonialism in Sri Lanka, but he caters to the taste of local readers by making use of exoticism after his migration to the West.*

Keywords

The Hamilton Case, colonialism, Sam, Jaya, Shiva

1. Introduction

The time span of *The Hamilton Case* is from the British rule in Ceylon to the nation's post-independent era. In *The Hamilton Case*, the West refers to the British Empire and the colonialism it has imposed on the colonized in Sri Lanka. The protagonists are thinking of the intrusion of the West while staying in their country, and then take actions to realize their dreams respectively. Their diasporic identities formed at this period are different and interwoven. The three characters, Sam, Jaya and Shiva in each section represent different stances to the intrusion of the West—the British Empire.

2. Embracing Colonialism

The question whether diaspora exist prior to the experience of scattering is always raised. Cho argues that “diasporas are at once already there and yet also in the process of becoming” (Cho, 2007, p. 16). The diasporic thought emerges under the external forces which have produced diasporas. The mental preparation for diasporic experiences and the voluntary movement is done by Sam. Born in an influential family in Sri Lanka, Sam witnessed his family's decline accompanied with the turbulent situation in his country.

Sam's intimacy with the British Empire originates from his family tradition. Sam's grandfather once served the British Empire. The full name of Sam is Stanley Alban Marriott Obeyesekere. The part of Sam's English-like name is from his godfather Sir Alban Marriott. All family members teach Sam from a very young age to follow the rules and grasp all the chances to get on well with the British people and truckle to them.

Sam is educated by the English teachers. Sam may be an interpreter between the British Empire and the millions of local colonized people in Sri Lanka. He is Sri Lankan in blood and color, but "English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1995, p. 430). In other words, Sam is cultured to be a mimic man through the English education in the colony.

The subdivision of the colonized among themselves is also delineated. In Sri Lanka, Burghers are descendants of European and Sri Lankan marriages, and they relish the superiority of their status. The native Sri Lankan people are in the middle, and Tamils are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Sam is despised by his teacher, who is "the first Dutch Burgher" and in Sam's eyes she owns the face of the "European purity" (de Kretser, 2004, p. 21). Suffering from the prejudices, Sam is regretful for not having the white origin. Meanwhile, he is the practitioner of racial discrimination and exclusion. He despises students from the Tamil families. Understanding the secret to popularity, Sam tries to connect himself with the British power and stand in the same line with them.

Sam is introduced to the Hamilton case: an English planter Hamilton was killed at night on his way back through the jungle path. According to Fanon, "black men want to prove to white men, at all costs the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect" (Fanon, 2008, p. 3). Sam dedicates himself to prove to the English men his intellect and proficiency, hoping that his feat would help him get the post of the District Judgeship from the British. After close investigation, Sam judged that the murderer is Taylor, also an Englishman. The trial turned out to be a heat around the country for Taylor was the first Englishman in the colony to be tried for murder. Failing to realize that by doing so he is "putting a noose around an English neck", and in his mind it is a simple matter of bringing "a murderer to justice" and display of his judicial talent and ability to English men, Sam misses the post he wants (de Kretser, 2004, p. 134). Instead of having a grudge against the British authority, his disappointment and failure result in the stronger sense of guilty of betraying the British Empire.

Sam passes his empirical hope on his only son Henry by sending Henry to London to study as soon as he reaches the school age. Henry should get a job and settle down in London, while Henry is in closer proximity to Sri Lanka. The father-son conflicts arise from incongruity in future plans and virtually in the opposite attitudes towards British power. The unsolved conflicts indicate disillusionment of Sam's colonialism bubble.

3. Resisting Colonialism

De Kretser depicts another character Donald Jayasinghe, who is classmate and rival to Sam. Unlike Sam, Jaya defies colonialism. What makes him a rival to Sam is his scorning and hatred for the British

colonialism, and his resolution to revolt it boldly. Jaya has never been assimilated with the British ideology that aims at implanting to the colonized.

Jaya started to detest the colonial education since childhood. Unlike other students, Jaya does not like all his English teachers. His wrath and resentment to his people's blandishing to the British men are irrepressible, and he deliberately confronts with and challenges the authority of the colonialism.

He has noticed the power of language and has seen through the trick played by English, so he detests using English words to describe things. Hearing Sam's remark on the beauty of their surroundings in English, Jaya questions and snorts it by saying "why use words designed for an English forest? They have nothing to do with this jungle of ours" (de Kretser, 2004, p. 86). Jaya is also aware of the fact of ideological penetration, so he warns his fellows that "the British occupy our imagination as well as our country", and they must keep vigilant and set their face against it (de Kretser, 2004, p. 87). Jaya is also bold enough to give offence to the English men directly and publicly. He embarrasses his English guests and visitors by fooling their chief and offends their culture.

Furthermore, Jaya brings social revolution by transforming the social tradition and life habits of his people. When he became the new Minister of Culture, he promoted several social changes like "handmade shoes from Bond Street exchanged for thick-soled sandals of local manufacture, single malt replaced by that vile fruit cup at official functions" (de Kretser, 2004, p. 35). As a nationalist, Jaya takes efforts to recover his national self-truth and struggles to "give shape to an everyday reality" in resistance to the image that is dominated by the colonial power (Boehmer, 2005, p. 104). His decision is also self-assertion of national culture.

Resistance has become a quite common word in post-colonial discourse, and indeed in "all discussion of 'Third World' politics" (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 19). The forms of resistance varied in different contexts and areas, but no matter what form the nationalist takes, resistance "has invariably connoted the urgent imaginary of war" (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 19). Jaya's manner of resistance ignites the faint hope to win the battle against colonialism and get rid of the colonial control.

4. Marketing Exoticism

Shiva's attitude towards the West undergoes a changing progress. At first, he disagrees with the colonial ideology. He perceives the essence and the way of British rule in his country. He questions the applicability of the western law in Sri Lanka, and recognized that their "legal system is literally foreign to our people. And so they strive to make sense of it at best they can" (de Kretser, 2004, p. 110). What makes Shiva prominent is that he is officially appointed as Additional District judgeship. The appointment raises Shiva's confidence massively and changes his stance to British Empire a bit. In fact, the appointment proves to be a genius and Shiva is factually a chessman. Compared with Sam, Shiva is less competent and he is not really bullish about the judiciary. As a Tamil, Shiva is taken advantage by the British, and the colonial rule deliberately seeks "the self-representation of subject or marginalized peoples" to activate its control (Boehmer, 2005, p. 100).

Shiva's understanding of the colonial power transforms completely after the country gains independence. He gradually recognizes that he has ingested the language English. Inspired to write in English, he moved to Canada and became a writer there. Shiva writes oriental elements to attract the western readers. According to Ng, de Kretser's portrayal of Shiva in *The Hamilton Case*, on the contrary, proposes that "the postcolonial exotic can be appropriated not just by the West but also by the marginalized in an exploitative manner" (Ng, 2010, p. 98). For Shiva, this seems to be an effective way of integrating into the western world and gaining benefits from the westerners.

As a diasporic writer, Shiva has realized that when writing a book, the picture "a girl with oiled hair threading her way barefoot through a paddy field was more authentic than a man downing a cocktail, one glossy shoe resting on a polished rail", and he understands the implications of the readers' preference well, for "the girl stood for a way of life uncorrupted by the West. That fixation on purity!" (de Kretser, 2004, p. 366). Moreover, Shiva uses plenty of totems in his literary work, such as guavas and temple bells, coconut oil, the fragrance of cumin. These totems, as Huggan remarks, help to "promote their status as Otherness in cultural products" (Huggan, 1994, p. 27).

There are means of marketing and promotion of the postcolonial writing for those writers to maneuver: "the construction of the representative foreign writer; the appeal to local color; the search for, or assertion of, an 'authenticity' not normally ascribed to one's own culture" (Huggan, 1994, p. 26). Being eager to become a member of the metropolitan citizen, Shiva knows well of the tricks in writing the exotic stories.

As one of the colonies, Sri Lanka is under strict control of the British Empire. The colonized people are unavoidably affected. Much worse, some of them have internalized colonial values like Sam; while some stand persistently against the colonial culture and struggle in various ways to get rid of it. Whatever strategies or stances they take, they have been baffled by the history of colonialism and race. Even in the post-independent country, the process of decolonization is lasting and arduous.

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