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Colonization and Resistance through Generations: An Analysis

Throughout the history of the United States, the Asian American immigrant experience has been defined by discrimination, colonialism, restriction, and standardization. These historical complexities can be broken down through the dissection of individual experiences. For my oral narrator, I chose Dr. Divya Victor, who currently teaches creative non-fiction at Michigan State University. Originally from India, she immigrated to Singapore as a young child and then to the United States as an adult. To dissect Divya Victor's oral history narration, I approached our interview with multiple objectives. One was to explore the influence of colonization on her and her family in different contexts. The first context is the United Kingdom's colonization of India and its lasting effects on education and the internalization of racism. The second context is the United States' involvement in aiding India to prove its racial liberalism and push its "Cold War Orientalism" ambitions. During this period, Asia became a special focus of the US military, economic, and political power in its global superpower stalemate with the Soviet Union.

My next objective was to take this theme of colonization and analyze the intersections at a generational and individual level to explore how Divya's identity has formed. To do this, I began with questions about her childhood and family. Another goal was to center on communication and visibility from a child immigrant's perspective. I wanted to examine whether she viewed her experiences differently as an adult, and whether she was biased as an

English professor whose work often focuses on her story as an immigrant. My final objective was to gauge her experience or resistance to the model minority myth, and subsequently, what methods she used in her resistance. To do this, I prompted the ending questions to discuss if it is possible to exercise agency in institutions and analyze writing as a catalyst and outlet.

When I spoke to Divya about her childhood and education, aspects of the conversation were reminiscent of Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. We discussed how her Anglicized schooling in India had significant gaps, particularly excluding Indian people in their story of modernization. She said, "I wasn't aware of colonialism as a child. I was aware of it only as a kind of contour of history... the education in history and geography did not emphasize that the ravages and the devastation of colonization, what it offered us was a kind of much more utopian narrative." This narrative emphasized the influence of the British crown and glorified the results of modernization without including the history of the native people it had been built upon. It paints colonialism as a mark or "contour" of history, instead of being the framework of existing institutions. In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," Lilia's father questions her education of the world after she wasn't familiar with Partition, causing her to reflect on how Americanized her education was. She described, "No one at school talked about the war followed so faithfully in my living room. We continued to study the American Revolution, and learned about the injustices of taxation without representation," (Lahiri, 32). When these homogenized education standards are upheld, they neglect international perspectives and deprive students of color of their history.

These differences in learned history and language in India resulted in a disconnect between the identities of Divya's family members. When discussing this, she stated, "I just didn't learn the same histories that my grandmother learned... and that means sometimes I feel

that my identity in this generation is hanging by a thread or like I feel I have to often research my way into feeling Indian.” This absence of Indian history meant that her knowledge of her history and culture would have to come from her own efforts. It was not emphasized as a necessary education, causing contrasting upbringings between her and her grandmother. In *No-no Boy*, Ichiro also reflects on a generational gap between him and his parents. He specifically highlights this gap in language, explaining, “Most of the old Japanese, spoke virtually no English. On the other hand, the children, like Ichiro, spoke almost no Japanese,” (Okada, 7). Faced with the values of two different countries, unrealistic expectations are placed on immigrant children to manage and balance these complex standards of their identities.

The gaps in education and differences in family identity trickled down and influenced Divya’s relationship with her Tamil culture. When discussing the generational consequences of colonization, she elaborated on the different relationships each side of the family had with their roots, saying, “My mother's family... we were attached to Tamil traditions and in our dress... But my dad's side was so Anglicized. They only spoke English, and sometimes ate with forks and spoons, their Indian food. And they didn't even listen to like popular Tamil music.” She grew up feeling a constant battle of identities between the colonizers and the secondary colonized. It didn’t feel like both could exist at the same time. When she would visit her dad’s side, “I didn't feel like all of me was there or all of me was seen.” She experienced having to choose the path of the new generation and what aspects of their identity they would be defined by. This generation could choose to accept English influence as a contemporary feature of their country or combat the internalized racism the crown has instilled.

Growing up in a post-colonial nation with a family divided over their colonial connection, Divya had two separate versions of herself. When considering these versions, she

said, “I think I love this whole other part of me. That wore long silk scarves and big earrings and ran around and bangles and singing songs. I don't think those two girls ever really met. Well, if they did, only I knew them together.” Through the contour of colonialism, she was never shown they could co-exist. One was standardized and characterized as “modern,” while the other was a relic of the past left out of education. In *No-no Boy*, Ichiro experiences his own identity disconnect through his family’s half-commitment to immigration. He voices his frustration, saying, “I am not your son and I am not Japanese and I am not American... I am neither and I blame you and I blame myself and I blame the world,” (Okada, 16). He yearned for the security of self in a society that refused to create a place for him. Because he belonged partially to so many identities, he ultimately belonged to none.

One barrier to colonial resistance was that Divya had always excelled at English. “I was so good at being like like an English speaker and also English was my strongest subject. I think I was just sort of proved off in that form in this little baby, you know, post-colonial subject.” She had an internalized conflict of giving up a part of herself to conform to post-colonialism, something that she also happened to be good at. This parallels “The Third and Final Continent” in its representation of the model minority myth. When Mrs. Croft asks the protagonist to say “Splendid!” in response to the moon landing, he is initially uncomfortable, but ultimately gives in, thinking, “I felt like an idiot. But it was a small enough thing to ask. ‘Splendid!’ I cried out. Within days it had become our routine,” (Lahiri, 183). This exchange displays how one can be eased into becoming a model minority, or play into the roles or stereotypes assigned to you because it is easier than resisting. In unpacking her memories of colonialism and condemning it, Divya actively resists the model expected for her to fill.

While discussing the model minority myth and its assumptions of Asian American immigrants, it is important to highlight methods of agency. When GB Tran researched his family history to create *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey*, he wrote it not as a rehearsed immigration historical reference, but as his own story with intentional images and real people. Through the medium of a graphic novel, he could decide the attention of the reader and remind them that these complex stories happened to real people. Divya exercises this same agency with writing, explaining, “There was something about language that made me feel so much more like myself than any other action or choice that I was making. It felt like breath.” Writing is her way of holding onto her memories and interpreting their meanings. She gets to decide how her stories are told, “not just as rehearsals, but as ways to discover the stories we haven't told yet.” This value in self-expression has allowed her to uplift the voice of her younger self, the child silenced by the contour of colonialism.

An important aspect of oral history is remembering there is often no conclusion. The narrator's stories are ones that are lived every day and will continue to be lived after the recording. It is a perpetual effort of finding an equilibrium between history, societal limitations, and individual experience. When asked how she balances her identities, Divya responded, “I don't... it's a dance in which I sometimes trip and fall on my face. And sometimes it's a fugue and there's no dancing at all... I think the balancing is the constant work.” Identity is often felt as a binary: fully encompassing or fully ephemeral. Discovering who you are within the binds of society is the challenge, but it can be achieved through introspection and the elevation of individual experience. Continuing to uplift Asian American voices and listening is the necessary step to alleviating this constant work.

Bibliography

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