

Opposing Colonialism through Art: Jamaica Kincaid

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[The white cliffs of Dover] were so steep, the correct height from which all my views of England...should jump and die and disappear forever.

—Jamaica Kincaid, “On Seeing England for the First Time”

That is a quote from the closing line of Jamaica Kincaid’s “On Seeing England for the First Time” (1991). Prior to this, the essay’s nameless narrator had walked readers through her lifelong entanglement with English culture as a colonised individual, from naïve impressions of England formed in her youth to revelations reached in adulthood. The essay’s end is a cathartic release of emotions built up over the narrator’s many views of England, a desperate cry to be free from all that she has perceived of the country. The narrator’s voice is deeply personal, so much so that one may find it difficult to separate the creation from its creator. With Kincaid hailing from Antigua (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021), which was colonised by the British in 1632 (Niddrie et al., 2020), there are echoes of Kincaid’s personal experience within the narrative of “On Seeing England.” Despite the sentiments conveyed by her narrator in the final line of the essay, Kincaid immortalises the very views of England that her narrator wished to erase. Such an irony could be read as an intentional literary device to establish the futility of attempting to oppose English colonialism, but I contend that is not all there is to her art. I believe that Kincaid actually does the opposite through “On Seeing England”—that it is through her immortalising of the colonised’s history that resistance is made a possibility. This present essay will explore the ways that one may perceive “On Seeing England” as a portrayal of Kincaid’s resistance against English colonialism.

The concept of perception is a crucial one throughout Kincaid’s text, highlighted through the narrator’s declaration, “[t]he existence of the world as I came to know it was a result of this: idea of thing over here, reality of thing way, way over there” (Kincaid, 1991, p. 37). The gulf between the narrator’s perception and reality is testament to the power disparity between English colonisers and England’s colonised, with Kincaid’s narrator being forced into the role of the latter. Perceptions imposed upon her by the colonial classroom: English tales of glory, romance, even individualism—ones that she could not attain in reality, serve as bleak reminders of England’s control; control that the colonised would never be able to reclaim, not even over themselves. This incongruity in the narrator’s perception plagues her, evident from her wish that England had never entered her field of vision in the first place.

Viktor Shklovsky shares Kincaid’s emphasis on perception in his 1917 essay, “Art as Technique.” Shklovsky’s paper comments on the ways art can impact perception through the technique known as defamiliarisation. He delves into the concept of perception by first observing that “as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic” (Shklovsky, 1917/1988, p. 1). Over-automatisation then limits one’s ability to perceive objects in their entirety, rendering them forgettable as they were never truly recognised. He warns readers that “unconsciously automatic” perceptions eventually lead to life being regarded as meaningless. Yet, there may be one way to avoid automatisation: art. Shklovsky goes on to weigh in on the significance of art, identifying its ability to “impart the sensation of things

as they are perceived and not as they are known” through defamiliarisation. He states that the goal of defamiliarisation “is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object—it creates a vision of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it” (p. 3). In doing so, Shklovsky opines, art’s defamiliarising effect spurs people to reconsider pre-existing ideas. By allowing subjective perceptions to take hold instead of imposing universally established meanings onto people, defamiliarisation in art imbues perceivers with the ability to break free from convention.

Kincaid capitalises on defamiliarisation to render the act of eating unfamiliar and in turn implore readers to re-evaluate the ways England exerts control over its colonised. The narrator’s description of how she eats “the English way: the knife in the right hand, the fork in the left, the elbows held still close to my side, the food carefully balanced on my fork and then brought up to my mouth,” reads tediously (p. 33). With the knowledge of Shklovsky’s warning on automatised perceptions in mind, Kincaid’s methodical listing of instructions for the typically habitual process of eating defamiliarises the act and intrudes upon its automaticity, attuning readers to the narrator’s lack of agency. England’s dominance is accentuated here; not only has it made itself apparent in the goods consumed by the narrator and her family, it even impinges upon the way Kincaid’s narrator eats. Ergo, the narrator appears powerless against England as the enjoyable act of eating is transformed into a strange and unfamiliar performance. This defamiliarisation of eating conveys the narrator’s saddened reality as a result of English influence and invites the reader to think deeper about the extremity of England’s control as they face a distorted version of an act they partake in every single day.

Kincaid’s narrator, in lamenting that unlike the English, her “prejudices have no weight to them” (Kincaid, 1991, p. 40), seems to prove that Kincaid’s art merely illustrates the individual’s helplessness against England’s colonisation. Try as the colonised might to give voice to their opinions of England, however prejudiced, their words are of no consequence to the coloniser. However, Shklovsky’s piece counters that impression. He gives weight to the interpretation that Kincaid has presented an opposing force to England and its colonisation of her country by increasing “the difficulty and length of perception” (p. 1). Readers are led to ruminate on their own views of England because her writing forces them to question what they had always been taught to think. Kincaid, in contrast to her narrator, is far from powerless against colonisation; through her art, Kincaid’s own seemingly invisible prejudices against England are metamorphosed into words bearing the ability to alter perceptions. Her use of defamiliarisation allows her to confront colonisers with the entrapment that constrains the colonised.

As Shklovsky’s paper engenders the adoption of a different perspective towards “On Seeing England,” so too does Kincaid’s writing remodel an aspect of “Art as Technique.” Kincaid’s application of defamiliarisation revitalises Shklovsky’s definition of the technique. In his essay, Shklovsky exemplifies the use of defamiliarisation with Leo Tolstoy’s writing, highlighting how he made “the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object” (Shklovsky, 1917/1988, p. 2). However, Kincaid’s defamiliarisation assumes a different form, as she identifies the act of eating before presenting it in a strange light. She brings forth the notion that the technique might be more potent when the reader is first acquainted with the object before art renders it unfamiliar. By drawing attention to their familiarity with the object, the reader is led into their comfort zone of unquestioning

contentment; Kincaid then interrupts this comfort by introducing the unfamiliar: the instructional, unnatural performance that eating is transformed into because of British influence. In such a way, Kincaid's essay may be seen to reinterpret Shklovsky's idea of the form that defamiliarisation takes.

Alongside the unconventional form of Kincaid's defamiliarisation is her inversion of the technique's function, as she uses the technique ironically in the narrator's reflection on her first view of England. Kincaid's narrator speaks of herself as a child in the classroom, looking at England on a map. While it would appear natural for a child to simply accept the country's rendered shape as it is, the narrator does not. Instead, she "prolongs" her perception (Shklovsky, 1917/1988, p. 1) by parsing the image of England into various components: "a bed of sky blue" and "shadings of pink and green," which seemingly are in a bid to gain a better sense of England. Nevertheless, she is ultimately unable to connect with the country. The narrator realises that despite looking "like a leg of mutton, [England] could not really look like anything so familiar as a leg of mutton" to her (p. 32). Through a twisted instance of defamiliarisation, the young narrator tries to perceive the unfamiliar as familiar, only to see that England cannot, in reality, be what she perceives it to be. This jarring inversion is all the more able to disrupt the reader's own automatised perception of England, and pushes them into the narrator's shoes, allowing them to experience just how alien England was to her. The narrator's perception of the country as a familiar object is belied by the reality England coerces its colonised to embrace. Defamiliarisation here, in spite of the narrator's hopes to reconcile perception with reality, does not aid in her quest to accept England. Instead, it challenges the reader to look inward and think about their own perception of England, now given knowledge of the narrator's struggle with the country that was meant to be "the source from which [the colonised] got [their] sense of reality" (p. 32).

Maya Jasanoff's *The New Yorker* article, "Misremembering the British Empire" (2020), similarly serves as a wake-up call to people lounging within the cosy bubbles of their own preconceptions. Specifically, she spotlights Britain's "blinkered" perception of their imperial history. Jasanoff starts by describing protesters in Bristol, England, tearing down a statue of a slave trader, attributing such a scene to increased questioning across Europe about the lingering effects of imperialism. Thereafter, she looks at the British government's abnegation of responsibility for their actions in ex-colonies, from undermining the importance of history as a school subject to burning government documents days before India's independence, actions that substantiate a narrative of blatant denial and erasure of British colonialism. This narrative is filtered, refined, then given to the British people, leaving them none-the-wiser of the truth. Ultimately, Jasanoff's piece ends with the belief that it is through questioning the imperial past that "historians imagine broader forms of recovery and repair. That, too, could be a kind of progress."

"On Seeing England," as a representation of the ways England sought to exert its influence over weaker countries, is a step towards the questioning that Jasanoff advocates for. The statue of the slave owner, Edward Colston, that "stood on Colston Avenue, in the shadow of Colston Tower, on Colston Street, around the corner from Colston Hall" (Jasanoff, 2020, para. 2) is overwhelming, and eerily echoes the "Made in England" (Kincaid, 1991, p. 33) label that haunts Kincaid's narrator. Still, such an acute awareness of the

remnants of colonialism may be a necessary pain. It is through recognition that questions can be raised, and discourse sparked.

Dr. Sharon Siddique highlights the continuing relevance of British imperial history in her talk at the November 2017 Singapore Platform for East-West Dialogue, titled “East-West and the Post-Colonial.” The talk contextualises colonialism to Singapore, as Siddique begins by cautioning her audience of the “dangerous ideological assumption implicit” in the term, “post-colonial,” which means that colonialism has relinquished its influence on present perception. She explains that while a Subaltern perspective of the colonial past is important, post-colonialism merely re-considers the past, neglecting to consider how colonialism affects the present, which is equally important. Singapore, having formed its identity within “boundaries which were so drastically altered by intervention of colonisers,” Siddique suggests, is unable to move beyond British colonisation.

Siddique broadens the significance of “On Seeing England” beyond Kincaid’s presumably White-dominant reader base. Her talk connects the essay to Singapore itself, as Kincaid’s portrait of her narrator’s colonial past takes on yet another form, that of a reflection mirroring the ways Britain coloured and continues to colour Singapore and its people. Kincaid’s art is thereby brought closer to the Singaporean reader. Just two years ago, the nation had a Bicentennial Celebration that came across as a blind celebration of colonisation (Tan, 2018). By directing her readers’ attention to the elephant in the room that is a country’s colonised history, Kincaid extends an opportunity for Singaporean readers to connect the dots between Singapore’s own colonised past and its influence over the nation’s present identity. It may be argued that in doing so, she raises the odds of Singaporeans thawing during what Siddique refers to as the nation’s “post-colonial frozen moment.”

On the surface, Kincaid’s writing may be interpreted as a mere depiction of colonisation, limited in its capability to manifest changes to its readers’ preconceived notions of colonialism and England’s responsibility towards the colonised. Yet, Shklovsky’s take on defamiliarisation as a compelling technique in art that brings new perspectives would disagree with such a view of Kincaid’s essay. Shklovsky’s piece, on the contrary, aids in recognising Kincaid’s essay as a forceful work of art that defamiliarises the concept of colonialism in order to successfully evoke readers’ recognition of the cognitive dissonance within them, as their values of freedom and selfhood are set against the spoliation that colonialism wreaked against those same values. Jasanoff’s article provides a basis upon which “On Seeing England” could be seen as an image of England’s past transgressions over its colonised, filling in a history that England has tried to blot out. Finally, Siddique’s talk impresses the idea that works pertaining to the topic of colonialism can have far-reaching, meaningful impacts on the world. In this instance, “On Seeing England” may inspire other previously colonised countries to recognise the ways colonialism has bled into their present, and perhaps even see how England has impacted themselves as individuals living in an ex-colony. Thus, I argue that what Kincaid has done through her art is monumental, much more so than forcing “all [her] views of England to jump and die and disappear forever.” While England had obliterated one culture and replaced it with another, Kincaid has presented an opposing force of her own against England’s colonization, one that presents both sides of the coin and does not reek of erasure. This is Kincaid’s opposition against colonialism.

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