

# Ambivalence of Identity and Dislocation Seen in “Lotus Eater” by W. Somerset Maugham and “The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses” by Bessie Head

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on identifying the ambivalence and displacement seen in two short stories. The first is “Lotus Eater” by W. Somerset Maugham and the second is “The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses” by Bessie Head. Both of the stories tells us about the cultural contact which occur in the colonial era where there are differences of culture and power operate. This paper uses Bhabha’s theory of ambivalence and dislocation in order to scrutinize the ambivalence and dislocation in the two short stories. This research paper finds out that in those stories, the ambivalent identity and sense of dislocation emerge and affect to both sides interacting in the cultural contact. Both the ambivalent identity and the sense of dislocation operate together to tell the complex relation of the entities inside the stories.

**Keywords:** *cultural contact, ambivalent identity, displacement*

## INTRODUCTION

Facing the postcolonial era makes us realize that the cultural contact is a common thing. Especially in this globalization era, we are getting more familiar to it as there is no nation can isolate itself from the global contact. The cultural encounter results in the emergence of hybridity. Hybridity is a creation of new transcultural forms (Bhabha, 1994). In this process, new unique individuals are created from a cross between two cultures. However, this process of creating hybridity sometimes can spark a problem which is caused by the difference of culture. The most common problem is how the difference of identity and place affect someone’s performance in the society.

In post-colonial criticism, problems of identity and place become two of the most discussed concepts which are related to the emergence of cultural contact and hybridity. The idea of identity and place are important to be scrutinized further in order to understand how the colonial discourse has penetrated all aspects of human life. Both cases of identity and place in postcolonial criticism are highly related to the theory of ambivalence. According to Bhabha, ambivalence describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized (Bhabha, 1994). This complex situation has led the case of identity and place in postcolonial discussion become interesting to be discussed as the ambivalence creates a state where the idea of identity and place become fluid not merely restricted to binary opposition of colonizer and colonizer or dominant and subversive. This condition of

ambivalence and dislocation can occur to both sides interact in the cultural contact.

There are two short stories that will be discussed in this paper. The first is "Lotus Eater" by W. Somerset Maugham and the second is "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" by Bessie Head. Both of the stories tells us about the cultural contact which occur in the colonial era. The first one tells about the cultural interaction between a settler and the natives in Naples, and the second tells about the interaction of the colonizer and the colonized in South Africa. In such situation, there must be ambivalent condition. Therefore, it is important scrutinize how the concept of ambivalence seen in the short stories especially when we talk about the idea of place and identity. This paper will elaborate that the ambivalent identity and the sense of dislocation operates together.

#### **AMBIVALENCE OF IDENTITY AND DISLOCATION IN "LOTUS EATER"**

The ambivalence and sense of dislocation in the short story "Lotus Eater" by Somerset Maugham can be seen firstly from how Wilson, as the main character, always romanticizes the beauty of the island of Capri. Wilson is an Englishman who inhabits Capri for fifteen years. "Fifteen years it is, and when I look back it seems like a month... But it wasn't the wine that made me drunk, it was the shape of the island and those jabbering people, the moon and the sea and the oleander in the hotel garden. I'd never seen an oleander before (4)." Although, he is an Englishman, he feels like the island is his true home after such miserable events happened to his family in England. He thinks that there he can find "leisure time" after such toil in his employment in England and after several family misfortune he had. He feels like he is attracted there and after such hard considerations he inhabits the island. As he lives displaced now from his native country, the practice of inhabiting becomes very substantial for him in order to find a

sense of belonging. This practice of habitation is more than the occupying of a location, it is itself a way of being within which, and through which, place comes to be (Aschroft, 2001). With inhabiting the island, he has to survive and feel it like his own home to build a sense of belonging.

Despite his attraction to the island, I find here that actually he feels ambivalent toward his sense of belonging in the island. I find that he always keeps boundaries and limits his interaction with the people of the island regardless of their locality or nationality.

"He bathed; he walked a great deal, and he seemed never to lose his sense of the beauty of the island which he knew so intimately; he played the piano and he played patience; he read. When he was asked to a party he went and, though a trifle dull, was agreeable. He was not affronted if he was neglected. He liked people, but with an aloofness that prevented intimacy" (p. 7).

This act of keeping boundaries can be the sign that he actually feels displaced in the island. In a new environment, act of keeping boundaries marks that a person has difficulty in assimilating into the new culture and, slowly, a sense of seclusion will start to emerge (Kaur and Singh, 2014). Wilson keeps himself away from the closeness to the people of the island and he does not talk much with other people that makes other people wonder about him. To find a sense of belonging usually someone will befriend or interact closely to the society but not with Wilson.

After his wife and mother died, he feels alone especially that he has no close relative in England anymore. "None. I was an only child. My father had a brother, but he went to Australia before I was born. I don't think anyone could easily be more alone in the world than I am" (5). This sense of loneliness leads him to feel displaced. Displacement is actually a common problem faced by person who

leaves his native land. Leaving the comforts of home and the familiarity of a routine daily life often leads to a feeling of displacement (Kaur and Singh, 2014). Wilson has to face this that he is not with his usual routine and relatives anymore. He feels attracted to the beauty of the island but his sense of displacement has created an ambivalent situation which creates the unique representation of Wilson in the story.

Further ambivalent situation of Wilson in "Lotus Eater" can be seen from his complex identity in the story. Wilson who was an Englishman owned a respectable position in his job when he was in England. He was a bank manager, in which the salary of a bank manager must be enough for him to be classified as the upper middle class person in the society. "Yes. I was manager of the Crawford Street branch of the York and City. It was convenient for me because I lived up Hendon way" (5). However, his way of living in the island is way different from his life in England. The narrator in the first sight of Wilson actually describes him as "he looked like the manager of a branch office in an insurance company, who should by rights be wearing a black coat with pepper-and-salt trousers, a white collar, and an unobjectionable tie" (2) but the way he lives up in the island is opposite "He lived thriftily, but with sufficient comfort. He never owed a penny" (7). This ambivalent identity is caused by the fact that he left his homeland. Leaving one's own country puts the person in "diaspora" and brings him/her "hybridity" and "ambivalence" (Zohdi, 2017). In fact, sense of home plays a crucial function in stability of one's identity. Therefore, a sense of displacement can be the main cause of an ambivalent identity.

### **AMBIVALENCE OF IDENTITY AND DISLOCATION IN "THE PRISONER WHO WORE GLASSES"**

In the story "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" by Bessie Head, I can find similar problems of ambivalent identity and displacement. The story tells about a clash between a white South African warden and an African prisoner named Brille. The postcolonial concept of place and identity here is clearly seen from the setting and characters. The setting is in the South African prison and the character's conflict is between the white minorities who rule the authority versus the black prisoners who oppose the system.

Prison in the story here presents as the boundary control that can be seen in the story as a place where the dominant exercises his power. Prison is the most concrete model possible of the coercive and surveillant power of a dominant authority, and when we observe the responses of political prisoners, particularly in South African prison writing, we find a concentrated example of transformative responses to imperial boundaries (Aschroft, 2000). Hannetjie, as the warden is seen firstly as the strictest warden who ward Brille and the Span One. He has ever violently punished Brille, as Brille steals a cabbage. "The next thing Warden Hannetjie whipped out a knobkerrie and gave Brille several blows about the head" (3). Here we see that Hannetjie, as the white warden is more dominant than the prisoners. He

also refuses to take order or answer back to the prisoners as he considers the prisoners as "kaffir" who are the racial acknowledgment given to the black South Africans by the white people. This is one strategy of the dominant to suppress the identity of the prisoners and give them a sense of displacement.

Although in this place, where the boundaries are overt, the ambivalent

situation can still occur. As Bhabha said, the ambivalent situation is disturbing the binary concept and the monolithic power of the colonizer (Aschroft, 2000), here we see that there is ambivalent situation between the warden and the prisoner. Hannetje, who is supposed to be the dominant then becomes less dominant as his affair of stealing the prison's fertilizer stock was found out by Brille. "I saw Hannetje in the shed today, I caught him in the act of stealing five bags of fertilizer, and he bribed me to keep my mouth shut" (3). After this event, Brille and Span One decide to give Hannetje punishment back in order to make him cooperate with them. Hannetje falls to their trick and the domination of him is over. Here, his action towards Brille and Span One becomes ambivalent, in one side he has to maintain his position higher as a warden but in the other side he has to cooperate with the prisoner. "He [Hannetje] had a way of producing unheard-of luxuries like boiled eggs from his farm nearby and things like cigarettes, and Span One responded nobly and got the reputation being the best work span in the camp. And it wasn't only taking from their side. They were awfully good at stealing commodities like fertilizer which were needed on the farm of Warden Hannetje" (4). This situation alters the

## CONCLUSION

The cultural interaction between two different cultures can lead to such ambivalent situation where the idea of identity and place become more complex. Interacting in two different cultures can build up a sense of dislocation where someone loses the feeling of belonging and creates boundary with the society. The sense of dislocation then disrupts the identity of the people and makes them ambivalent. The ambivalence of identity experienced by an individual is also due to the clash of culture with different power when they disagree about a certain value. They are torn with the condition where their own old identity should be pre-

identities of Hannetje. This alteration including ambivalence and in-betweenness in their social, psychological and cultural attitudes and perspectives towards world, people and themselves (Oguz, 2013).

The ambivalent situation is caused by the failure of the prison system to suppress the identity of the prisoners. The prisoner's identity is still strongly preserved but the warden's identity here is suppressed and led toward ambivalence. Werbner as cited in Olsson states that in the colonial encounter, it is not just the colonized who are subjected to Western ways, the colonizers too are transformed, while the colonized deploy borrowed forms to tell their own, distinct narratives which unsettle and subvert the cultural authority of the colonizers (Olsson, 2010). Therefore, the ambivalence condition is not always occurred to the subservient but can also occur to the dominant. The warden, Hannetje, who seems to be ruthless is the one who finally fails to survive in the system that is his own culture's invention. His identity now is in ambivalence as he starts to cooperate with the Span One. His ambivalence is the mark of colonialism that cannot fully control the identity of the entities interacting inside it.

served but in the other hand they must adapt to the new one like what happens to Wilson, from the first story. His identity as an Englishman becomes ambivalent due to the interaction of two cultures, between him and the people of Capri and also there is a sense of displacement that strengthens the ambivalent situation faced by Wilson.

Ambivalence might also occur to both of the colonizer and colonized and affect to the disturbance of the monolithic power of the colonizer. In an ambivalent situation, there is a clash of two different cultures and power of the dominant and the subservient. Not only the subservient that can be ambivalent but also the dominant. It presents in the second story that tells the clash

of power between the white warden and the African prisoners. The warden is faced with ambivalent situation when the prison that should be the system of displacing the prisoners fails to contain them. The prisoners' identity is still strongly preserved but the warden's identity here is suppressed and led toward ambivalence. Thus, an ambivalent identity is later formed by the warden to survive.

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