

Carlos Bulosan's America is in the Heart: Reconciling Postcolonial Conflict



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America is in the Heart begins with Bulosan's childhood and traces a difficult immigrant experience defined by poverty, rootlessness and illness and culminates in a remaking of his self through writing. As Rajini Srikanth notes, the novel is "curiously marked by a faith and idealism in the possibilities of the United States even as it relentlessly exposes the grim existence of Filipino migrant workers in the country"(98). It is curious indeed, that Bulosan should end his novel on an irrevocable note of faith as the novel is peppered with episodes of cruelty in America. His experiences in America are marked with ambivalence and rootlessness, characteristics that Paul White discovers is common within migrant literature because "the act of migration often relates to the calling into question of many of these aspects of identity that make up the individual's personality and psychological self-image" (2). The novel distinctly occupies two spaces, the Philippines and America. Literacy and writing are important tropes that differentiate his experiential existence in those two spaces, and ultimately allow him to recreate the vision of America that he is comfortable with. Through writing, Bulosan negotiates a space for himself within the imagined binaries of colonizer and colonized. The novel's central problem is highlighted immediately when Allos finds himself standing between his brother Leon and his father, "my brother on my left, my father on my right"(21). This vision represents the dilemma that Allos faces as he struggles to reconcile his Filipino self with his desire to be an American. As he stands between Leon and his father, he recognizes a dichotomy that he is unable to bridge initially. The Old World represented by his father, is organically rooted in the earth. In the old world, Allos is an illiterate little boy who yearns to be educated and literate, vowing to become a writer so that he can exhume the ghosts of his fellow colonized subalterns, <https://assignbuster.com/carlos-bulosans-america-is-in-the-heart-reconciling-postcolonial-conflict/>

making them “ live again in [his] words” (57). The New World is represented by Leon and his new-fangled manners as he adopts American etiquette because “ he was being educated in the American way” (20). Here, I have to clarify that the new world does not refer to America itself, but his idea of America when he was a little boy, as presented by Leon. This dichotomous idea of the Philippines and America as colonized and colonizer is ultimately problematic because it traps Allos in an imaginary difference. This binary assumes America as superior, and it is on this premise that Allos travels to America. Allos first notices his difference on board the ship to America when an American girl comments that “ those monkeys” (99) should be shipped back to the Philippines. His narrative takes on a faster pace when he reaches America. He travels almost aimlessly, wandering from Seattle to Alaska to Sacramento to Stockton to Washington to San José to California and so on. This is in stark contrast to his life in Mangusmana where he describes with some melodrama that he was “ leaving all of [his] childhood now” (30) when his father persuaded him to leave for the city. The people in this section of his life are almost equally random. We meet Julio, Max, Marcelo, Conrado, Paulo, Claro, Nick, Alonzo, to name a few, some who do not have any significant purpose in his life. The lives of the Filipinos are also insignificant in America. They are gunned down mercilessly “ for fun” (129) until the next Pinoy comes along. This seemingly fast pace and disregard for human life creates a feeling of alienation that a migrant culture faces when they are “ confronted by an alternative ethnic awareness that labels and confines them to a stereotyped ‘ otherness’ from which there appears little chance of escape” (White, 3). Faced with inhumanity, Carlos struggles to make sense of the violence and stereotypes imposed on him. He is immediately

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introduced to the harsh realities of the treatment of migrants as he is ruthlessly milked for his worth by opportunists who sell them as cheap labour to canneries and plantations, leaving them with a pittance after deducting “ twenty-five dollars for withdrawals, one hundred for board and room, twenty for bedding, and another twenty for something I do not now remember” (104). Confronted by “ brutality [he had not seen] in the Philippines”, he remains resolute in not “ completely succumbing to the degradation into which many of [his] countrymen had fallen” (109). When he finds work with a large household, he learns that Filipinos like him were stereotyped as “ sex-crazy,” going “ crazy when they see a white woman” (141). This episode is also significant because she goes on to classify him with “ niggers [and] Chinamen, with their opium” (141). This scene illustrates the othering that the dominant White imposes on their colonized subjects that accounts for the struggles that Carlos experiences. The discouragement that he feels in America is projected onto the ethnic women, and he is disgusted with them as he sees the ideals of America in the White women. The ethnic women are “ careless” (150) with themselves. Most notably, we have the scene in the bunkhouse where Carlos is “ pinned down on the cot, face upward, while Benigno hurriedly fumbled for [his] belt” because “ a naked Mexican woman [was] waiting to receive [him]” (159). We also have Myra, “ a young Mexican girl who was always flirting with the other men” (149). The White women, on the other hand, are described with purity, the “ onionlike whiteness of a white woman's body” (141). Marian is another example as she prostitutes herself for Carlos, eventually dying of syphilis (218). The classic example, however, would probably be Eileen Odell, where he states that “ she was undeniably the America I had wanted to find in those frantic days of fear and

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flight, in those acute hours of hunger and loneliness. This America was human, good, and real" (235). As Dolores de Manuel puts it, " American women, in contrast, signify the goodness and purity of American ideals, offering friendship and acceptance to the oppressed" (40). Robinson Crusoe is an important figure in the novel that occupies both spaces. Carlos is first introduced to Robinson Crusoe by his brother Macario. Robinson Crusoe's tale is essentially one of an exile, and there are many parallels between Carlos's life in America and Crusoe's exiled life on the island. Macario's advice foreshadows Carlos's life in America when he says that " Someday you may be left alone somewhere in the world and you will have to depend on your own ingenuity" (32). Carlos thinks of Robinson Crusoe again when he is symbolically exiled in the hospital. He details his " lostness" (252) and concludes that he is lonelier than Crusoe because he was " lonely among men" (252). Macario also straddles both spaces. In the Philippines, he was regarded as a strong wall, " protecting me from the attack of an unseen enemy" (21); however in America, Carlos notes that " he spoke more rapidly now. As I walked beside him, I felt that he was afraid I would discover some horror that was crushing his life" (130). These comparisons compound the rootlessness that Carlos faces in his search for identity in America. It is in the midst of such confusion that he decides to write. As Oscar V. Campones claims, the Filipino novel is " a literature of exile and emergence rather than a literature of immigration and settlement" (51). I agree with him in this case because Carlos's motivation for writing was driven by " loneliness" (289) in a land where he could not get acceptance, try as he may. Writing in English, the colonizer's language is fundamentally akin to the empire striking back, though I will not delve into specificities of this term in this paper. Through <https://assignbuster.com/carlos-bulosans-america-is-in-the-heart-reconciling-postcolonial-conflict/>

writing, Carlos, confronts his struggles and deals with the problems of his assimilation. He demonstrates the “ exile’s desire to retain cultural roots, whilst at the same time being drawn to the abandonment of ‘ otherness’” (12). In the first two parts of the novel, Allos wanders around, trying to fit into America. His disillusionment heightens when he finds out that Macario succumbed to Helen, a “ professional agitator” (203) who disrupted their strikes. He describes his disappointment as “ god of yesterday falling to pieces” (202). However, this rootlessness slowly decreases by Part Three when he meets the Odell sisters and they acquaint him with writing. Through this act of writing, he “ reinscribes himself within the new world, not merely assimilating to their environment in America” (de Manuel, 39). Writing provides a bridge for Carlos (who becomes Carl at this point) to return to his past and embrace what he had tried to shed in America whilst trying to assimilate. Carl starts embracing his past, most emblematically when he dreams of Binalonan, explaining that his father had “ come back to me in a dream, because I had forgotten it” (283). Symbolically, Macario addresses him as Allos again (261) and they reunite with Amado. Carl also notices that there was “ something urgent” in the friendship between Amado and his friends. He notes that “ they created a wall around themselves in their environment” as a defense against their environment (170). What this means is that there is solace in returning to the familiar and usefulness in maintaining a bond with their origins and past as they break those ties by becoming assimilated into a new culture. It is therefore very important to note that in the final chapter, Allos/Carlos/Carl thinks of the “ bells that had tolled in the church tower when I had left Binalonan” when he heard the bells in America. Through writing, he recognizes another vision of America that

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has place for him, one that creates “ a fresh mode of relation toward their present and their past, a way of seeing themselves within the new order” (de Manuel, 39). In my focus on the rootlessness of migrants as well as the importance of writing, I have left out many important ideas and works of authors pertaining to postcolonialism and Marxism that are equally vital in understanding this novel. In particular, Edward Said's discussion on binary oppositions and Frantz Fanon's ideas on the colonial complex would offer other perspectives that give a more comprehensive analysis of Bulosan's semi-autobiographical work. Bulosan's novel launches us into a discussion of the struggles that migrants feel in their search of an identity. The displacement that they feel stems from stereotypes that the colonizers impose and trap them in. There is a constant anxiety that America would change Carlos (126) and Carlos in turn notes that the people he knew in the Philippines have changed. Writing allows Bulosan to come to terms with himself as an exile. It is a solution that nurtures him and “ provides [him] with emotional and imaginative nurturing, and reconnects [him] with a necessary ground of [his] being” (de Manuel, 46). Seen in this light, the overwhelming hopefulness that he ends the book on is not as strange because he has managed to reconcile his struggles. In a strikingly bildungsroman fashion, the initial dichotomy of the Philippines and America that Carlos initially faces is reconciled most symbolically in the dream that is described by Campones as “ the dream of return as formed from the site of departure [that] reflects back the idea of exile's loss and gain” (67).

Ultimately, Bulosan is able to end on such a hopeful note because he has experienced so much more than he would ever in the Philippines. Works

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