

The conqueror and conquered: a shift towards mutual development



In her work, "To Name is to Possess", the author, Jamaica Kincaid, vilifies the possessive mentality that has captured human minds for centuries. While disparaging this class of conquerors, Kincaid connects human conquest to our dominant relationship over nature. She then acknowledges her participation in the class by recognizing herself as a garden owner. On a deeper level, she wrestles with this identity. How does she negotiate between her intrinsic desire for ownership and the necessary respect for that which she owns? What significance does this negotiation hold?

She begins her critique of this conquering class with an example of human entitlement to the environment, allowing us to understand conquest in the context of gardening. Kincaid selects a passage from Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*. Rich with diction, it describes a life of comfort through the environment. The "little feast[s]" (114), "splendid afternoon[s]" (114), and "flood[s] of summer light" (114) communicate a sense of entitlement to the beauty and graces of nature. Kincaid elaborates on this later by describing the passage as something that "could have been written only by a person who comes from a place where wealth of the world is like skin, a natural part of the body..." (116). The excerpt continues to describe the extreme privilege of its writer. The "beeches [that] flung down a shade as dense as that of a velvet curtain" (115), and the forest that seemed to be a "furnished... with cushioned seats, with rich-coloured rugs, [and] with books and papers that lay upon the grass" (115) reflect not only an unusual level of comfort, but also a sense of ownership over the forest. The passage by Henry James does not describe nature through its beauty, but rather evaluates nature strictly through its material value. Furthermore, Kincaid's

choice to include the aforementioned quotes from another source seems to imply that her position on conquest is objective. By making her position appear objective and universal, Kincaid increases her ethos with us. The passage also serves as her own sourced paradigm of the problem that she is addressing. The excerpt from *The Portrait of a Lady* convinces us that we as a society have a tendency to take possession of the environment around us.

Kincaid then argues that, in order to cement our possession of this environment, we use the mechanism of naming as a construct. She introduces us to the *cocoxochitl*, an Aztec flower that was recognized for its intrinsic value. In this case, the Aztecs did not name it to assert a kind of ownership over it, rather, it “seems to have been appreciated and cultivated for its own sake and for its medicinal value” (118). The name itself references the flower’s ability to treat urinary-tract disorders. This relationship is pure and respectful, supporting a mutual existence with the environment as opposed to an oppressive one. The author then juxtaposes this with the European practice of naming – a more possessive and territorial tool. After the Europeans had conquered the Aztecs, they renamed the *cocoxochitl* to the *dahlia*. This effectively served as “a murder, an erasing” (122) of the history and value that the flower once held. This new name, *dahlia*, became a recognition of the conquerors who took the land. The name stems from Andrew Dahl, a botanist who hybridized the plant. The *dahlia* simply became “one of the details, a small detail, of something large and grim: conquest” (118). The flower became another item for its owners to possess. This example juxtaposes the naming customs of two civilizations to clarify the possessive nature of this construct. The author continues to vilify

the possessive nature of humanity as we return to conquest in the context of gardening. Kincaid recalls a flower she had seen in the mountains of her home country. She describes them with colorful vivacious words - as " tall stalks of red flames" (119). Yet, these flowers reminded her of a weaker variant that she had seen in North American gardens. She " cannot stand" (119) that duller, " dwarfish" (119) version. This anecdote buttresses Kincaid's position against conquest, and strengthens her apparent view that indigenous flowers should not be exported to other places in an attempt to " simply go out and take someone else's beauty for [oneself]" (119).

Gardening has become an extension of human dominance.

Now gardening has become a manifestation of humanity's toxic desire for conquest and power. Kincaid brings us to a memory of a botanical garden owned by the British in her home country of Antigua. The conquerors of her Antigua used the garden to grow foreign plants without taking any interest in the plants that were native to her country. She asserts that they are the reason for her ignorance of Antiguan botany. The British botanical garden was just a manifestation of their breadth and range as an imperial titan.

More importantly, these gardens " reinforced for [the author] how powerful were the people who had conquered [her]" (120). This proves that conquest had served its purpose to her conquerors; they had cemented themselves as an authority that could build and crush their subjects at will. This is the conqueror-conquered dynamic that Kincaid bemoans, and it appears most often through human interaction with nature - more specifically in our gardens. These scathing criticisms seem almost hypocritical as she herself owns a garden. Appropriately, Kincaid reflects an element of disgust in her

hobby as she depicts herself gardening. Describing herself as “ covered with dirt, smelling of manure [and] flecked with white dust” (121), she recognizes that “ in the place [where she is] from, [she] would be a picture of shame” (121). The imagery she creates communicates how others from her home might treat her with contempt for her conquest through gardening in a style so similar to that of Imperial Britain. However, she then shifts to address her own perspective on her practices. She shows her personal approval of her conquest in gardening by describing “ her body [as] a cauldron of smells, pleasing to her” (121). Her approval of her own gardening seems strange and even hypocritical. Here, she begins her shifts into this group, despite her condemnation of other historical conquerors. When the author finally reflects on her own experience with gardening, her tone and diction reflect a wonder and awe that seem to diminish her power as a conqueror. The image of her, “ sitting at a window that looked out over [her] own garden” (122) reflects a kind of fascination that is not only very different from a typical conqueror’s desire for power, but also reflects the kind of innocence and purity that defined the Aztec mutual relationship with nature. She takes pleasure in the fact that when “ putting things together (plants) you never really know how it will all work until they do something, like bloom” (122). Kincaid reflects an organic curiosity for the beauty of nature, and relinquishes her control over the plants in her garden.

Despite the reality that “[she has] joined the conquering class” (123), Kincaid redefines the relationship between the conquering and the conquered. None of the previous conquerors that she described had this balance – a respect for the development of the conquered. In their case, “

nothing about [the conquered class was] of any interest unless the conqueror deem[ed] it so" (120). These historic conquerors exhibited an expediency and disregard for the development of their properties, dynamics that Kincaid has fully rejected. In their days of empire, " these countries in Europe shared the same botany, more or less, but each place called the same thing by a different name" (122). This exemplifies the epitome of greed as these conquerors attempt to claim even commonplace plants for their respective, yet not-so-different cultures. All of these power reflect the expediency that Kincaid has previously vilified. This behavior does not reflect the bona fide respect for nature that the Aztecs had and that Kincaid herself has revealed. Kincaid has redefined how conquest should be perceived. In her eyes, it is more than the acquisition of property. Conquest ideally resides in a mutually beneficial relationship where both parties are encouraged to grow - not just the one in power. Humanity has " lost touch with that strange idea - things planted for no other reason than the sheer joy of it" (117). Conquest is no longer something large and grim, rather - through gardening - is local and can be beautiful. We as a society have forgotten what it means to pursue goals that do not directly advance ourselves. " To Name is to Possess" is a larger criticism of materialism, and furthermore, a call back to symbiosis with that which gives us life. Kincaid reminds us that relationships are built for all parties involved. In one's relationship with the earth, its environments, and its people, one must remember to respect and encourage mutual development.