



CARLOS BULOSAN: AMERICA IS IN THE HEART

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In looking at Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, we have to consider several components to grasp a real understanding of how this novel places itself both within and outside the confines of traditional American literature. The novel in terms of its literary, historical, and thematic contexts can be viewed as a whole in order to address several critical questions regarding the story's purpose and its social implications both then and now.

1. What does the text reveal about the problematics of post-colonial identity, including the relationship between personal and cultural identity and such issues as double consciousness and hybridity?
2. How do themes of violence, racism, and migration effect the narrative without overwhelming Bulosan's message and style?
3. In what ways does Bulosan's unconventional narrative style and tone highlight the underlying themes of conflict and social struggle experienced by the various characters?

In terms of these questions, we must understand how some of these terms are defined and relate to the work at hand. Starting first with our first key question:

1:

- **Post-colonial criticism** is concerned with literature either produced by colonial powers and works produced by those who were/are colonized. Post-colonial theory looks at issues of power, economics, politics, religion, and culture and how these elements work in relation to colonial hegemony or (western colonizers controlling the colonized).
- **Double consciousness** deals with describing the individual sensation of feeling as though your identity is divided into several parts, making it difficult or impossible to have one unified identity.
- **Hybridity** - also relates to post-colonial theory and non-colonial migrant situations. It refers to the migrant's culturally mixed identity as the opposed forces of assimilation and the search for roots create a divide. In this instance, the term hybridity is used to refer to the impact of the culture of the western colonizers, or the global culture, on the society & culture of the colonized – or in this case, the Philippians and the Filipinos.

In looking to our second area of concern:

2:

Looking to his themes & narrative style in the story, there are many, what we could agree are, uncomfortable situations that are richly detailed. Bulosan had to be careful in his work that this particular device was used in the story in a such a way that the reader was not overwhelmed with so much discomfort and that they would stop reading. Carlos works very hard to craft a persona for Allos early on that is emotionally sensitive, innocent, and realistic – so that when he encounters the discomfort in his journey, the audience feels compelled to emotionally carry through the experience with him wholly.

3:

His narrative style is both uniquely layered and yet very simplistic. His choice of diction and tone make it easy for the reader to follow the often fast and chaotic pace of the story. However, his ability to inform the reader of underlying conflicts, emotions, and events, that the naïve narrator is not even aware of, shows great planning and detail within the deceptively simple story. The tone and autobiographical nature of the narrator also lends to the previous issue in dealing with challenging themes of violence and racism.

Post-Colonialism –

“I came to know afterward that in many ways it was a crime to be a Filipino in California.”^[1]

“It is my conviction that there are always two nations in every nation: the dominant on-going nation, enchanted with its self-proclaimed virtues, values, and glorious traditions, and another nation that exists on sufferance, half-buried, seldom surfacing, struggling to survive.”^[2]

- The attitudes and social norms towards immigrant migrants at this time depending primarily on their usefulness

“They worked as one group to deprive Filipinos of the right to live as free men in a country founded upon this very principle.”^[3]

- Compared to how they were socially and culturally treated by Americans both abroad and in the States

Much of the novel showcases issues with American involvement within both the Philippine nation’s political, social, and cultural structures. It also highlights the effects felt by the Asian immigrant communities state-side. As shown through many of the other stories and novels from this course, western desires are often carried out at the expense of disenfranchised groups.

In general, it was only when “others” were useful to Western nations that they received any sort of benefits.

Some of those situations may have included:

- For farm work, fishing, canneries, & construction only when other sources are unavailable
- Their use in the Philippines to assist with local politics and colonization
- Filipino assistance in the wars in exchange for citizenship that rarely, if ever, was granted

But more often, these cultures were polluted, demonized, and misused resulting in damaging effects felt across many generations.

- Often denied basic human rights to vote, own property, seek education
- The enforcement and creation of laws to restrict the movement and actions of Asian and immigrant people
- The rejection of citizenship and naturalization

- Any attempts to seek better treatment was met with raids, violence, murder, denial of housing or medical attention.

Hybridity & Double Consciousness

“As time went by I became as ruthless as the worst of them, and I became afraid that I would never feel like a human being again.” ^[4]

Even at the most basic level, Bulosan’s leading man has two distinct identities: Allos and Carlos.

- This tension from the beginning creates an internal struggle for identity that continues throughout the novel.

“Was it possible that, coming to America with certain illusions of equality, I had slowly succumbed to the hypnotic effects of racial fear?” ^[5]

- Carlos has a strong desire to return to his home and stay connected to his family. At the same time, he has a desire to improve the lives of the Filipinos trapped by the cruel American social system.
- He often attempts to maintain his identity and the hybridity of his situation in assimilating into the American & American Asian cultures and social expectation, but those efforts are often met with repeated and realistic failure.

- As mentioned earlier, Bulosan takes great care to create the identity of Allos early on.
- Had we perhaps not started the story with the naïve and uneducated Allos, we might not have been as sympathetic to the actions and choices made by the much older Carlos.
- In the small reaches of his family farm, Allos is only yet aware of the world as it seems to be and not for what it truly is.
- There is often underlying political and religious tensions affecting his family.
- Whether it’s the influence of America on a national level or the influences and separation of the classes within the various provinces and villages – Allos is too innocent and unworldly to understand what we ourselves realize is happening.
- His inability to identify the causations of his struggles lays much of the groundwork for his identity crises later in life.
- But I would argue that the love, warmth, and sense of family commitment contributes equally to this identity crises.
- Allos has experienced a loving and hard working family environment.
- He has seen the horrors of village life forced upon his parents and siblings – the

stoning of his sister-in-law, the repossession of his father's land, the way his mother is treated at market, and the death of his sister.

- But with every defeat his family pushed on, trying harder with each tragedy.
- So it is no surprise that the older Carlos struggles to leave behind these ideals as easily as his Americanized brothers and fellow countrymen.
- As Carey McWilliams described Bulosan in the opening of the novel, there is an obvious internalized conflict of identity within a man who refused to succumb to self-pity and continue to fight against his demons and of what it means to be moral or immoral, American or Filipino, a brother, a writer, an immigrant, a man constantly on the move, and a man who wants stability.
- *Carlos stated that, "I have a tremendous passion to make others happy. So daily I have to fortify my heart against assaults, abuses, inconsiderations of people around me, close to me, dear to me. I tried to understand and interpret chaos and cruelty from a collective point of view, because it was pervasive and universal. It was this narrowing of our life into an island, into a filthy segment of American society, that had driven Filipinos...inward, hating everyone and despising all positive urgencies toward freedom."*

Hybridity & Double Consciousness

"Why was America so kind and yet so cruel? Was there no way to simplifying things in this continent so that suffering would be minimized? Was there no common denominator on which we could all meet? I was angry and confused, and wondered if I would ever understand this paradox."^[7]

"He was going to pieces fast, because he had started drinking, too; and a chasm was opening between us, widening each time he committed a crime."^[6]

- The struggle with his brother Amando, his more violent and disillusioned brother – a Foil to Carlos.

"Write more poems, Carl," she said. "I don't care if you are a Communist or not. I like your music. I think you will be a good American poet."^[7]

- Effects of hybridity occur often, in particular the latter half of the novel. These continue to warp and extend Carlo's identity.
- The more time he spends in America, the more he attempts to connect his many cultural and social identities into one: An American-Filipino-Communist (sometimes)-Writer/Poet/Storyteller/Activist

- Amando also presents an interesting segment to the story.
- While each of the four brothers acts a significant plot device, I would argue Amando serves as the most notable.
- Amando is closest to age to Allos and experiences many of the same struggles and tragedies in the Philippines with his brother.
- They also experience much of the same culture and social issues in the United States.
- Unlike his brother, Amando is quick to temper, sees little value in working ones self to death, and easily succumbs to greed, violence, and vulgarity.
- Often when the story reunites Amando and Carlos it is to show just how far Amando has fallen and to remind Carlos of his internal struggle and who he doesn't want to turn into.
- We get the sense when their other brother, Macario is ill and Amando offer to care for him, that perhaps Amando too struggled with his identity – having lost the battle now plaguing Carlos
- There are opposing forces in Carlos's mind: his desire to maintain his Filipino identity and attitudes towards the world, his desire to remain a good brother,

and his need to change the way his people are treated in the United States.

- He must also deal with the negative consequences of those around him who share in this migrant identity: his brothers' criminal acts, the rape and violence by other Filipinos', the gambling houses from the Chinese, the union spies, etc.

Looking to my last point we can see more of his identity develop through his work with the Communist parties, his desire to teach American history and democracy, his want to absorb worldly literatures and writing methods & become a more American writer.

He also has a desire to utilize these new methods and skills to document his own non-American heritage. He writes about having discovered with that Philippine folklore was uncollected, that native writers had not assimilated it into their writings and how he'll use this discovery not only to study the roots of Philippine folklore but to integrate the folklore into their struggle for liberty.

Racism and Attitudes

"Where there was prejudice, I challenged it with prejudice. But where there was goodness, I reacted with goodness. This attitude, too, was conditioned by my experiences."^[8]

- Early in the novel, Carlos discusses the Roldan vs. The United States case. Before the case, Filipinos were considered Mongolians. Carlos goes into the details of how language and anthropology were utilized in order to promote racism and an sense of "others."

"Ten important points—a broad generalization of our difficulties in California."^[9]

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|---|---|
| 1. Buy Real Estate | 6. Denied the right to become naturalized American citizens |
| 2. Denied Civil Service Jobs | 7. Discriminated against in relief agencies |
| 3. Marry Women of the Caucasian race or marry in California | 8. Denied better housing conditions |
| 4. Not allowed to practice law | 9. Police mistreatment and brutality |
| 5. Not allowed to practice law | 10. Denied recreational facilities in public parks & other spaces |

- Early on he talks about the Roldan vs the US case
- The law forbids the marriage between members of the Mongolian and Caucasian races, and those who hated Filipinos wanted them to be included in this discriminatory legislation.
- Anthropologists and other experts maintained that the Filipinos are not Mongolians, but members of the Malayan race.
- It was then a simple thing for the state legislature to pass a law forbidding marriage between members of the Malayan and Caucasian races, abusing the language and science.
- While descriptive violence is often used as a device to depict the very physical racism and violence against the Filipino and immigrant peoples in the story, there is another scene that lays out the more legally enforced Jim Crow-esc laws. The meeting in the novel points out these ten common issues faced by these communities.

Displacement

"The people ran for their lives. But for some it was too late."^[10]

-Hundreds of times throughout the novel Carlos and others are forced into displacement. Words like: Left, Moved, Leave, Removed, Evicted, Run Away, Fled, Hide, Driven Out, Fear, Not Allowed – and others are numerous throughout.

-Displacement is a common, novel long theme. Carlos is continuously displaced both in the Philippines and on the west coast of the United States.

"I looked back sadly. It was another farewell. How many others had I met in my journey? Where were they now? It was like going to war with other soldiers; some survived death but could not survive life. Could I forget all the horror and pain? Could I survive life?"^[11]

-This is an important theory to come to terms with not just in the instance of this novel but because it is in many ways a national and contemporary experience endured by many during the last century.

Even though Allos is introduced to the struggle of displacement early on, it becomes an integral part of Carlos' experiences. He is constantly on the move, hunted, and driven away – creating an ever present sense of unease and hesitation within the reader.

This displacement applies to all migrant situations.

Not only is there a clear physical divide experienced by the Filipinos, there is a very real cultural and social one.

Carlos and others are chased away because of their Filipino origins and non-whiteness.

While some displacement comes about via the laws mentioned on the previous slide, more often the displacement occurs out of the fear for survival.

The desire to escape harm, to find a paying job, a place to sleep or eat – creates within both the Philippines and the Americas a migrant culture where men and women are forced to roam nomadically or risk losing their sanity, virtues, morals, or lives themselves.

This plays up Carlos's issues of double-consciousness and identity – he is often angry at those that displace and deny him, but he also struggles internally to do well for his people and remain of good moral character through most of the novel.

It is only when he succeeds in obtaining large amounts of cash, or when he is hospitalized that Carlos experiences some stability as an adult.

This is a very fragile and rare state that only a few other Filipinos experience: The ability to obtain education, to express themselves artistically and politically, to maintain a safer and semi-permanent residence, and to receive ample medical care and sustenance.

Bulosan comments a few times in the novel the struggles of similar immigrant groups who encounter the same issues of displacement – showing that the experience is not exclusive to minorities or men.

Literary Commentary / Writing Style

"A long time ago in Los Angeles, when we had been less articulate, my brother Macario had spoken of America in the hearts of men. Now I understood what he meant, for it was this small yet vast heart of mine that had kept me steering toward the stars." [12]

"My clothes began to wear out. I was sick from eating what the traders discarded. One day an American lady tourist asked me to undress before her camera, and gave me ten centavos for doing it. I had found a simple way to make a living. Whenever I saw a white person in the market with a camera, I made myself conspicuously ugly, hoping to earn ten centavos. But what interested the tourists most were the naked Igorot women and their children. Sometimes they took pictures of the old men with G-strings. They were not interested in Christian Filipinos like me. They seemed to take a particular delight in photographing young Igorot girls with large breasts and robust mountain men whose genitals were nearly exposed, their G-strings bulging large and alive." [13]

As compared to

"I found a hotel on Third Street that was tenanted by dark Europeans. It was managed by an elderly woman who, when I asked if Orientals were accepted, explained that it was not an American establishment. **She meant that Filipinos were allowed to stay so long as they abided by the rules.**" [14]

It's important to note, that this novel was written in 1946 and set in the 1930s & 40s. This is critical when you consider both the intended audience at the time, as well as the contemporary one.

As stated previously, his narrative style is both uniquely layered to inform the reader of key characterizations and themes. But in truth, some of these themes and characterizations can only be interpreted as they are in great part because of the time in which we now read it.

As educated readers of the 21st century we understand connotations of racism, the civil rights movement, internment camps, and immigrant phobia from the early part of the 20th century. It is our privilege to be able to understand why the experiences of Carlos and the others were so tragic and inhuman. And while at the time Bulosan was writing for a mainstream American Audience, it is not entirely true that they would have comprehended this story the same as we now do.

We see this in the way in which Bulosan takes care to explain certain situations. While there are times he blatantly states what is meant by a passage or word, other times he relies on his readers ability to connect to the story through raw and primitive human emotions to understand the severity of the text's message.

Here we can compare his methods of direct statements versus the implied.

The first passage he gives details on the actions expected of him that he's figured out in order survive.

We know that the narrator is being used and that we can understand the novelty implied by the white-tourist towards Allos but it is not directly stated.

The second passage Bulosan could have ended the sentence after American establishment, and it is likely as contemporary readers we might have understood the irony and sarcasm implied by the statement. But here we see a translation of the meaning in bold.

This varied styles reflect how the story is viewed through the eyes of the young and naïve Allos, and the educated writer Carlos.

It is also worth noting the use of Bulosan's narration styles. Often he shifts between a limited/naïve narrator, an omniscient narrator, a third person, and first person narrator. Sometimes he even speaks as an objective and narrator.

These shifts in narration and his methods of writing style tend to mirror the way in which the story is unfolding. There is a zooming effect felt within the novel at times, rich narratives overlapping with real historic events, laws, and issues of the time. They also follow along Carlos's own growth as a writer. As he becomes more educated, more traversed, more well read, the style in which the novel is told takes on a more traditional approach.

It is this traditionalist method that likely makes the novel more appealing and although it pains me to say so, it was also likely the reason it was more exposed to the mainstream American audience. Had the novel been too untraditional or too focused on the emotional and often passionate passages without the intent of social change, it may not have had quite the same literary success it so deserves.

Implications & Answers

- In *In America is in the Heart*, Carlos Bulosan presents his perspectives not only on the migration story, but also on identity.
- We must consider how the text reveals the problematics of post-colonial identity, including the relationship between Carlos' personal and cultural identity.
- Finally in this semi-autobiographical, globalization often supplants colonization, further complicating the quest for identity and social change.
- Bulosan's methods interweave a personal story with social purpose designed to speak not only on the Filipino experiences of loneliness, alienation, and violence, but to show how far a single act of kindness and acceptance can go into changing the lives of these out-casted Americans.

- In speaking on migration and identity, we see that through a postcolonial lens, Bulosan's themes – including cultural tensions, racism, em/immigration, and the quest for identity – are further enhanced by his use of a descriptive and unconventional narrative form.
- In addition to his narrative methods, it is also necessary to consider how the protagonist's identity clearly show issues of double-consciousness and hybridity. Both of which are complicated by continued displacement, exile, and violence. They are additionally affected by the author's initial naivety and growth throughout the novel.
- And speaking in terms of globalization & colonization, Bulosan illustrates early on the

political and social impacts the American nation has, at that time, on the Philippines and their colonized status.

- And finally, his literary style reinforces these themes and creates a unique insight into the struggles of the Filipino immigrant during the 1930s & 40s.

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