INTRODUCTION

“A little learning is a dang’rous thing” (Alexander Pope, An Essay on Criticism, 215).

Alexander Pope’s the most quoted line is very rewarding here to understand how faultily handled power, freedom and knowledge can worsen the conditions in newly independent countries such as Jamaica Kincaid’s Antigua, Chinua Achebe’s Nigeria and India or Pakistan in different phases of independence. The present paper is an attempt to comment upon pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial experiences and their consequences basically on Antigua or broadly on any third world country.

DISCUSSION

Jamaica Kincaid, now an immigrant of Antigua, looks back on the pre-colonial history of, though, not too learned but prosperous Antiguans and laments, “That Antigua no longer exists partly for the usual reason, the passing of time, and partly because the bad-minded people who used to rule over it, the English.” English people came to Antigua as mere merchants and gradually established their economic as well as cultural superiority to the extreme that the natives perceived them as to be “Angels from the realm” (46). They spread the trap of roads, started schools, library, hospitals and economic institutions like Mill Reef Club etc. in order to implement their perpetual colonial strategies of enslaving Antiguans and exploiting their natural resources by shaping natives’ mentality in favor of themselves (colonizers) either through creating fear or with the pretence of development.

Kincaid satirizes colonialism for this slave trade, economic, linguistic, religious and cultural exploitation and imposition of everything Western upon the natives. She says that the colonial incidents inspired the natives to acquire power that of colonizers and then to have self-governance. The only way for it was getting independence, mainly political independence, which they obtained through pushing away colonizers.

Nevertheless, irony of this colonial knowledge is that the natives (here it means elite Antiguans) learned just how to control others, or to reserve more and more power into their own hands and how to live luxurious life without having even momentary concern about true meaning of democracy i.e. “of the people, for the people, and by the people.” (Abraham
Lincon qtd. by Jain). Akin to Chinua Achebe’s Chief Nanga, the protagonist of the novel A Man of the People (1966), politicians of free Antigua make out only how to win elections through the corrupt system of politics what they were against in the first place. They have centralized economic, political & cultural powers. Kincaid criticizes this combination in mock heroic style and sates that the Minister of Education, of Culture, and of Sport is the same. She reiterates, “…in places where there is a Minister of Culture it means there is no culture….And what is culture, anyway?” (49). She tells that in Antigua culture is a garb behind which politicians protest politicians of opposite party. For example, her mother- a radical from opposite party is denied from pasting posters on government building. It is another thing that she boldly squabbles with the minister and sticks the poster.

In addition, Kincaid writes that politicians initiate every kind of corruption or evils. In the series of wrong doings of politicians, she enumerates that the Prime Minister facilitates banking services so that Antiguans can take loan for buying Japanese cars from the company in whom the Prime Minister himself is a partner. Thus, as the pivot of the government (and so of banks or economy) and the company he is doubly benefited. Contrary to it, burden of interest on the loan and poor conditions of family life force taxi drivers to be dishonest. So, they demand for more than actual fare, and use impure / cheap oil in the taxies. This results in damage of the engine before repaying the loan. Except, Antiguan things reproduced in other countries are resold in Antigua on high price. In this way, poor become poorer, while wealthy people either deposit their black money in Swiss banks or spend it on extravagance such as doing shopping from New York or London.

Not only polity and economy, but also schools, library & hospitals of colonial era are not given proper care. With a reporter’s perspective Kincaid records that the PIGOTT’S SCHOOL is now used as public latrine. Similarly, the beautiful library that was smashed in an earthquake in 1947 still has “…a legend saying, THIS BUILDING WAS DAMAGED IN THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1947. REPAIRS ARE PENDING” (9). Instead of amendment, the library has been shifted into a small room above dry goods store. When the writer (Kincaid) meets the Minister of Culture regarding library, he is told that St. John- a notorious person is buying the land of ruined library for erecting a business hub on it. When she asks another rich but infamous prostitute who have illegal relationship with some politician; she also prefers building shops in place of library.

Further, “The hospital is staffed with doctors that no actual Antiguan trusts ;”( 8). Ministers receive treatment from New York by traveling in their planes. But, what’s about
poor people? They can’t afford tour to another place so that they might have escaped from miserable conditions.

Besides, big hotels are nucleus places for drug dealing or smuggling. With the help of politicians some people inspire prostitution. These privileged people are too racist and afraid of the present that they fence their houses with naked electronic wires without thinking of possible consequences. Accordingly the Governor General is electrocuted when he enters into the swimming pool. Similarly, an improperly managed refrigerator causes electrocution of an official and his son etc. These incidents remind the readers of Nadine Gordimer’s short story “Once Upon a Time” in which a racist’s son dies of being caught into the sharp fencing of his own house.

Above discussion proves that although Jamaica Kincaid censures colonialism for its lacunas including: selfishness and cruelty of colonizers / slave masters, replacement of Antiguan culture and history with their self made biased interpretations of Antiguans as “Monkeys” etc.; yet she ascertains goodness of colonialism on postcolonial situations. She seems to be asserting that Antiguans have attested their animal instincts of mimicking like monkeys. They have gained colonizers-like power but are misusing it in exploiting their own fellow Antiguans. In the vein of T. S. Eliot’s critique of London in The Waste Land, Kincaid expresses her anguish saying that the colonial Antigua was “not real” and present Antigua is also “not real”. Colonizers and natives all are like “human rubbish” (80) in “gutter” (47). In short, independent Antigua is approximating a “petticoat with holes” (Virginia Woolf, Daughters of Educated Men).

Conclusion

A Small Place is “A loving explanation…a small book full of big ideas” (New York Newsday, qtd. Kincaid’s A Small Place). It is addressed directly to the readers in meta-fictional style: a style that has also been adequately employed by Italo Calvino in his “If on a Winter’s Night Traveler”. A critic has appropriately examined, “Like ‘The Ancient Mariner’ in Coleridge’s poem, Kincaid will not let you go until you’ve heard her tale” (Boston Herald qtd. Kincaid’s A Small Place). Kincaid has successfully brought out dangers of a little learning through incorporating her personal story with the history of pre & post colonial as well as colonial Antigua.
Works Cited