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The Other Side of Paradise by Staceyann Chin (2009) Relationship: Book Review

“I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it.”

- Maya Angelou

The Other Side of Paradise is a memoir written by Staceyann Chin (2009) in which she portrays the true nature of being a woman of color. This coming of age memoir presents the attributes of black women who are at times devalued and negatively portrayed by Eurocentric critics. It is through her independent self-definition and her thoughts about racism and sexism that she is able to put an end to false Eurocentric assumptions. In Chin's (2009) memoir, she explores the reality that women of color have strong personalities and powers through sisterhood and motherhood that are symbols of unity between black women. By using spirituality as an anodyne, she was able to achieve patience and inner strength, tested by a racist society.

Introduction

The Other Side of Paradise is a memoir written by Staceyann Chin (2009) in which she portrays the true nature of being a woman of color. This coming of age memoir presents the attributes of black women, who are at times devalued and negatively portrayed by Eurocentric critics. It is through her independent self-definition and her

thoughts about racism and sexism that she is able to put an end to false Eurocentric assumptions. In Chin's (2009) memoir, she explores the reality that women of color have strong personalities and powers through sisterhood and motherhood that are symbols of unity between black women. By using spirituality as an anodyne, she was able to achieve patience and inner strength, tested in a racist society.

I decided to review *The Other Side of Paradise* by Staceyann Chin (2009) because it vividly illustrates the intersections that we as women face within a racist, misogynist, and patriarchal society. As someone who grew up in the patriarchal, homophobic country of Jamaica, and later on migrated to America, a country that has many of the same issues, I see how diverse populations suffer from these societal plagues. I selected this memoir for my review because of my own personal insights into the conditions that the memoir addresses. My objective is to bring awareness and understanding to others by letting them know it is all right to be different, even when it means acting in opposition to the values of the society in which one lives.

It was effective for me to review Chin's (2009) memoir because I am Jamaican and grew up in a Christian household too. I understand clearly how

socialization is the reason why we play roles that are assigned to us and make certain choices in our lives. By immigrating to the United States of America, I was able to make my dreams of furthering my education become a reality, though it proved more daunting than I imagined. Like Chin (2009), my mother left me in the care of my grandmother at an early age. I have always said that the person I have become today is through my grandmother's influence and the way in which she raised me. Therefore, much credit is given to my grandmother for all the hard work, dedication, and knowledge she shared with me.

Chin (2009) was born in Jamaica, and her writing draws from lived experiences both from her past and present. In her memoir, *The Other Side of Paradise* (2009), she speaks about the experiences she had being from a mixed-race, Jamaican household. She uses words like "sexual deviant" and "unwanted child" that depict the treatment of marginalized bodies in Jamaica (Chin, 2009). The memoir describes her coming of age in Jamaica during the 1970s and 1980s where she lived as an abandoned child who was physically and sexually abused. In her memoir, she describes her struggle as a young woman to get an education. Her self-identification as a lesbian provoked much violence and

hostility (Chin, 2009). It became very difficult for Chin (2009) to separate her neglect and the trauma she experienced as a child when she reflected on the treatment she endured during her childhood years. The fact that she was an outspoken individual, a lesbian, and a biracial woman definitely compounded her challenges. Often times, Chin (2009) was chastised and beaten by her aunts and other family members, branded in Jamaica an unruly child. This reputation spilled over into adulthood when she dared to make the connection between corporal punishment and slavery (Chin, 2009). She went further in connecting these concepts to child abuse and rampant homophobic violence on the Jamaican island (Chin, 2009).

The Journey

Chin's (2009) journey began at a very tender age when she and her half-brother were left in the care of their grandmother because their parents abandoned them. Immediately after Chin (2009) was born, her mother migrated to a different country. Her father, a Chinese businessman, denied the fact that he had any relationship with her mother. Chin's (2009) grandmother was poor and could not support her, so she was sent to live with different family members who thought of her as a burden because there was not enough food to feed an extra mouth. Her living

conditions were terrible because some of the homes she stayed in had no electricity or running water. Others living in Blood Lane, Montego Bay, Jamaica, had television, helpers, and the finer things that life had to offer (Chin 2009). Chin (2009) often got into trouble because of her mouth, and when this happened, the adults would use the Bible for reinforcement. Chin's (2009) aunt would say, "Stacy, the good book tells us in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (p. 7). I too was a culprit for voicing my opinion, giving my thoughts, and especially asking questions even when the family was not talking to me. I got into trouble many times with my grandmother, who would always say "speak when you are spoken to," "shut your mouth," and even ask the same question like Chin's (2009) grandmother. For example, Chin's (2009) grandmother would ask, "if her mouth set on a spring" (p. 37), meaning that her mouth is always going off (p. 37). According to American author, feminist, and social activist bell hooks (1989), "children were meant to be seen and not heard," and this is a typical example of the issue hooks (1989) speaks about in her book *Talking Back* (p. 5).

Although Chin (2009) lived a difficult life, she was an intelligent child. This opened the path to her gaining entry into a prestigious high school, despite her

race and identity. The school's population was diverse, so she was able to mingle with the rich kids regardless of the fact that she was poor (Chin, 2009).

Chin was viewed as a half-breed, which is what Jamaicans called someone who is mixed with the Chinese race. Her family members verbally abused her constantly, due to her lighter skin color. At times she was called worthless, which resulted in her being beaten as a form of punishment. Chin's (2009) brother Delano was aware of the privileges he had over her, using his masculinity against her, which their grandmother allowed. Traditionally, in Jamaica, it is the norm for boys to have an education and girls to be raised to be housewives. Consequently, this made Chin (2009) more vulnerable to several attempts of sexual abuse, which she endured while living in Jamaica.

When I lived in Jamaica as a youth, I was in a similar situation as Chin (2009). I was subjected to more restrictions and control than my brothers. Boys could go outside and play and perform jobs that were considered a "man's job." My brother had more social experiences than I did; he was privileged just like Chin's (2009) brother, Delano. Unlike my brother, I was expected to remain indoors performing work typical of a housemaid, which is what society deemed women's work. My lack of outside adventurous experiences when

growing up resulted in the majority of my time spent in the classroom and the home instead of playing outside with my friends. Despite the social restrictions I had, I excelled in elementary school and was also able to attend high school and college back in Jamaica.

The Coming Out

Throughout history, people have been stigmatized not only for their race and class, but also for their sexual identity. Our lives are not shaped by one lens, but through all elements of our identity. Inequalities force us to acknowledge this reality and thus bring to the forefront the importance of studying the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality. As feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1989) and Kimberly Crenshaw (1997) make clear through their research, intersectionality incorporates both elements of personal identity and sources of social identity. The way in which an individual presents his or herself to other people is shaped by external forces and also life experiences. What we are raised to believe, and how we are raised, affects the way in which the self is presented, perceived, and how people perceive us. It is important to know that our backgrounds and beliefs cloud our perceptions; bear in mind that what is real is dependent on what is socially acceptable.

In Chin's (2009) memoir, sexism, racism, religiosity, and classism played roles in the homophobic life she lived in Jamaica. It was a *must* for Chin (2009) to attend church and Bible study during the week because her grandmother was a religious woman. In centuries gone by, women of color found jubilee in the Bible. Religious knowledge is passed down from generation to generation. Chin (2009) was not the only person who was forced to attend church; I was in that similar situation until I reached my twenties and then said, "No more!"

It was later in Chin's (2009) life that she discovered and came to terms with her sexual orientation. This did not sit well with her family members and friends. Chin (2009) endured beatings, humiliation, and verses from the Bible quoted to her in an attempt to not only control her sexual identity, but her way of life. Her family wanted her to live her life as a straight woman. Regardless of how her grandmother and brother tried to control her sexual identity by showing her love, they both began to gradually fade from her life due to economic conditions such as poverty.

Not only did her father abandon her, but her brother did as well. The men she encountered throughout her life were not better. These men either suffered from drunkenness or were sick or mentally ill, which resulted in estranged relationships. At some point in her life,

her biological father paid for her school fees and assisted her with college admissions. Regardless, he treated her like a nobody and never did conceptualize her as his blood. He was constantly absent from her life, and this affected her in a negative way. At one point, she thought that her brother's father was a blessing in disguise, but she was wrong. He also helped her financially, but it became clear that her brother's father had a motive. His assistance came with a price. She was forced to have sexual relations with him (Chin, 2009). To Chin (2009), all the men in her life failed her. Even the preacher, who was supposed to help people in need, took advantage of her sexually.

Midway into Chin's (2009) memoir, she opens up about her sexuality, which did not fit into the heteronormativity of her society. This was not the only way in which she deviated from the cultural norm; she was light-skinned and had a looser hair texture, which made her the subject of envy and lust. Chin (2009) faced many challenges in the course of navigating society with her nonconforming sexual identity and physical appearance; violence was one of those challenges.

The societal attitudes that made her sexual identity and physical appearance significant could be said to be the product of heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy, which normalize ways

of being that are quite different from Chin's (2009) life. Her sexuality is inseparable from the social context in which she exists. Sexuality is in a backdrop of socializing and social cultural factors. For example, how men and women of today are either categorized as masculine or feminine is based on society. Historically, we have witnessed the regulations of sexual orientation through formal societal controls enforced through law and judicial mechanisms, such as the illegality of homosexual marriage in many countries.

It is very difficult for Chin (2009) to own her true identity as a lesbian living in the heteropatriarchal, homophobic country of Jamaica where there is no tolerance for the LGBTQ community. As a Jamaican, I know first-hand the treatment Chin (2009) endured as an individual who stepped outside the norm of the binary gender system. According to an article in *The New York Times*, "On Being Queer in the Caribbean," written by Gabrielle Bellot (2015), this hatred is rooted in the legacy of the colonial laws of the British Caribbean, which criminalized sodomy and reinforced the powerful influence of anti-gay evangelists. The culture in Jamaica is very different from that of the United States, which is more open and accepting to people who choose a different identity from what they were

assigned at birth. Yet, as someone who has lived in both countries, I am aware that intolerance is also rampant in America, even though it may be in a different form. In Jamaica, people are scared to openly live their sexual truth because of the violence they will face from their countrymen. However, I will admit that cultural norms and practices have always shaped the way in which the LGBTQ community is perceived.

I use the word "homophobic" to describe Jamaica because the word covers a wide range of different viewpoints and attitudes which are conveyed through violence and discrimination. In the article, "Sexuality in the Caribbean," Barry Chevannes (2003) states that "homophobia is particularly intense in the Anglophone Caribbean, with Jamaica perhaps heading the ranking" (p. 75). Although racism is something that Jamaica and the United States both share, this modern-day racism faced by Chin (2009), myself, and others bears similar consequences to that of the hate crimes experienced in the past. Regardless of how bad Chin's (2009) life was, she found the strength to use her talent in a progressive way and was able to prove the naysayers wrong. Her struggles were real, yet she rose above it all and found peace, peace within herself and her identity.

Conclusion

My own experiences observing the discrimination and intolerance in Jamaica do not stem from my own identity; however, my experience affirms the truth of the story that Chin (2009) tells in her memoir about the challenges of navigating an intolerant society. Chin's (2009) memoir effectively portrays the range of issues that Jamaicans have faced both past and present, and she tells a remarkable tale of maintaining a radical and nonconformist identity in the face of oppression. Readers who themselves wish to stand up against injustice in society will do well to read this memoir and will perhaps draw informative lessons from Chin's (2009) struggle to adapt and ultimately assert her own choice. Her memoir might have benefited from taking more of an approach to informing Jamaicans and other oppressed communities about the

changes in perception of sexuality and gender that have occurred throughout the rest of the world. My reason for saying this is that society's views, research, and perception from centuries ago are based on rich older white men who did not include intersectionality and the transition from binary to non-binary identities. Not to forget that the *Combabee River Collective* (1977) is a statement written by women of color who identify as lesbian and use their platform to critique issues about the intersection of sexual oppression, racism, and heterosexism. However, Chin's (2009) memoir is still a powerful expression of herself and her defiance of societal norms. Having gone on a similar journey of self-discovery and migration as she has, I feel confident in recommending this memoir as a substantial feminist, anti-patriarchal text.

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