



Echoes of Colonialism and Identity Crisis: A Postcolonial Analysis of Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*

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Abstract— *Spirited Away*, a Japanese animated fantasy film written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki in 2001 brings to the audience a story of a young girl, Chihiro who along with her parents enter into the world of spirits. The film narrates a story of disruptive identity, language, and belonging of the protagonist, Chihiro and echoes themes of cultural displacement and colonization. This paper will analyze the film and the journey of the individuals into a colonized space, where conventional identities are suppressed within a dominated cultural landscape. This paper will delve into an argument where the film will be analyzed from the perspective of postcolonialism, where Chihiro's experiences in the spirit world reflect the tussle of the colonized people dealing with distorted identities, language, and complicated notion of belonging. Chihiro's arrival into the spirit world corresponds with the encounter of the colonized individual with the culture of the colonizer, where the transformation of her parents into pigs paralleled with the dehumanization and compromise of identity of the colonized. Chihiro's renaming as Sen, language as a tool of control, and disturbing their sense of belonging highlights the colonial imposition on humans in the world of the spirits. The bathhouse in the film is symbolic of the colonized space where the identities, languages of the colonized are constructed and contested. The paper will also try to analyze how the protagonist takes up the journey towards self-discovery and reclaims her identity, culture, and autonomy in the midst of oppression.



Keywords— Postcolonial theory, identity, culture, animated film, spirit world

In the realm of Japanese cinematic storytelling, Hayou Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli have contributed animated films that are loved by audiences worldwide. Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001) captivates the audience through its nuanced narrative, breathtaking visuals, and minutely crafted characters. Beneath the film's glory lies the exploration of themes that contribute to the complexities resonating with human experiences. This paper delves into ways the film can be critiqued from the postcolonial perspective, examining how the spirit world in *Spirited Away* is a colonized space highlighting experiences of the colonized people by the spirit world or the colonizers. Chihiro, the protagonist's experiences in the spirit world reflect the difficulties faced by the colonized individuals who are forced to adapt to the colonizer's cultural practices.

From a postcolonial point of view, the paper argues how the colonized individuals fight against distorted identities, sense of belonging, and language. Through the film's narrative, the paper analyzes the allegory of colonialism where the identities are constantly constructed and contested. The paper argues how the transformation of Chihiro's parents into pigs is parallel to the dehumanization of the colonized by the colonizers. The paper discusses Chihiro's journey toward self-discovery, and how the reclamation of her identity serves as a metaphor for the difficulties faced by the colonized people during the assertion of autonomy amidst colonial domination.

The film opens with Chihiro and her family traveling to their new home in a new town against Chihiro's

wish. On their way, they discover a way to an abandoned place that takes them to a deserted place with stalls full of food. Upon eating the food for the supernatural creatures, Chihiro's parents turn into pigs leaving Chihiro as a human body. While she explores to get help, she meets Haku who offers her help and introduces her to the bathhouse, a place for the supernatural, which is the only place where finding a job would break the spell and help re-enter the "human-world" (Reider 5). In the bathhouse, she is forced to change her identity, renamed as Sen, adjusting to the rules and practices of the spirit world. As Chihiro navigates the spirit's realm, she encounters spirits like Yubaba, at its center, Kamaji, a boiler man who keeps the bathhouse running, Lin, Chihiro's spirit friend, and No-Face, a mysterious spirit. Along with Haku, she embarks on a journey to bring her parents back to the human body and safely return to the human world. Undergoing various challenges, she saves her family, finds her identity, and leaves for their new home.

The themes of postcolonialism are central to the analysis of the film *Spirited Away*. The theory emerged in the mid-twentieth century examines the cultural, social, and political legacies of colonialism and further understands how colonialism has shaped identities, impacted societies of colonized people, and disrupted the cultures original to them. Central to postcolonial theory is the colonizer-colonized relationship that tends to explore the exercise of power imbalance and dominance over the colonized, through identity erasure, coercion, displacement, and a lost sense of belonging.

In the film, the postcolonial themes and the colonizer-colonized relationship are navigated through Chihiro, a young girl transported to the world of spirits or the bathhouse, run by Yubaba that serves as a colonized space, where the colonized are exploited through labor. The spirits realm represents the colonizer exercising dominance over the colonized. Chihiro, forced to work in the bathhouse, adopts the colonizer's practices and identity, symbolizing the colonized. Lastly, the film subverts the relationship, as Chihiro challenges Yubaba's power as she asserts her autonomy. To understand the construction and contestation of identities in the postcolonial space by the colonizers, the film's narrative is broken down into several points to illustrate the ways of colonization.

Chihiro's encounter with the spirits in a different realm marks displacement and disorientation in her character which parallels the experiences of the colonized individuals in a space that gives them a new identity, introduces new cultural norms, and imbalances the power dynamics. Chihiro's journey into the spirit world is not only a physical movement but an exploration of identity in the

psychological and cultural aspects. The imposition of a new culture identity, and language on Chihiro reflects displacement into a world that recognizes her as inferior and different. In a postcolonial context, the colonizer's cultural values are upheld over the colonized values. Similarly, the bathhouse is presented as a space where human customs are seen down by the spirits, thereby, creating a divide that portrays Chihiro's sense of alienation.

Central to postcolonialism, Othering examines the construction of the colonized as subjects of difference. The moment Chihiro steps into the spirit world she is perceived as Other and a marginalized subject. This Othering illustrates her treatment as inferior in the already established order. When she enters the supernatural world and begs for work from Kamaji, the boiler man, she is denied of work, and is also asked to not take the work appointed to someone else. He comments, "If they don't work, the spell wears off" (28:25) which signifies the colonial control over the colonized. In the bathhouse, Chihiro is positioned at the bottom and his statement reassures the boundaries between Chihiro and the inhabitants of the spirit world. The notion of Othering is evident when her parents unaware of the different world consume the food meant for the spirit world, leading to their transformation into pigs. This act is significant for the colonizer's dominance over the colonized as they failed to understand the colonizer's culture. The colonized individuals were perceived as less human by the colonizers when they refused to conform to their practices and customs. By reducing Chihiro's parents to animals in the film, the inhabitants of the spirit world exhibit them as inferior, needing control. In colonial conditions, this dehumanization demonstrated exploitation, as it portrayed the colonized as undeserving of autonomy and power.

In the film, the bathhouse represents the colonized space, ruled by Yubaba controlling not only the operations in the realm but also the lives of the workers. This space reminiscences the forced labor established in the colonial periphery. Therefore, the domination and oppression lead to the erasure of the identity of the colonized subjects in the colonial space. Upon entering into Yubaba's world, Chihiro is renamed as Sen. Renaming emerges as a tool of control, within the colonized space, reflecting the colonizer-colonized relationship. This act is an embodiment of colonial control echoing an erasure of the former identity and connection with a new identity. The loss of Chihiro's identity baffles her, thereby, making her presence within the other realm ambiguous. The dominance and renaming in the bathhouse makes it a space where those in power redefine identity. Chihiro finds herself in a space where her identity as Chihiro does not exist and the new identity imposed on her is not fully integrated. This in-betweenness reflects Bhabha's idea of liminality and hybridity, where the

colonized subject is stuck in between two worlds, emphasizing the tension between the two. As Chihiro starts living as Sen, her memory of her former identity fades, reflecting the colonized individual's experience of identity erasure. The act of diminishing the name Chihiro, where Chi meant "thousand" and hiro meant, "to seek" to Sen which meant "one thousand" symbolizes swiping a part of her identity that screams exploration and discovery (Sarmin 4).

The notion of unhomeliness, as coined by Bhabha, is an aspect of hybridity. "Bhabha's Notion of Unhomeliness in J.M.Coetzee's *Foe: A Postcolonial Reading*" states, "Unhomeliness is an emotional state: unhomed people don't feel at home even in their own homes because they don't feel at home in any culture and, therefore, don't feel at home in themselves" (107). When Chihiro is identified as Sen in the bathhouse, she feels disconnected from home, and her new identity constantly unsettles her. This hybrid identity imposed on her leaves her in a liminal space that makes her feel alienated within both realms.

The workers within the bathhouse are bound by strict rules, emulating the hierarchical structure existing within colonial domination. Chihiro's assigned menial tasks in the spirit world echo the power dynamics where tasks like cleaning floors and serving guests are designated to lower ranks of people in society and are expected to work relentlessly to remain in the working system. This aspect highlighted through Yubaba's expectation from Chihiro in the film, emphasizes on tireless work by Chihiro to stay in the bathhouse. Therefore, establishing a dependency of the colonized individuals reflects colonial power dynamics, where colonized people are forced to believe in their inefficiency without the colonizer's support.

Each character's identity is shaped to suit the role within the rigid hierarchical structure of the bathhouse. Lin, one of the workers, has accepted the oppression yet reflects moments of rebellion, while guiding Chihiro in the bathhouse. Her attitude reflects her internal struggle, and her situation between assigned roles and her desires. When Chihiro first enters the bathhouse, she is viewed with suspicion by the bathhouse workers, including Lin. Soon she readily helps Chihiro to escape the bathhouse, bring her parents in human form, and get back to the human world. This underscores her attempt to protect Chihiro, making an effort to defy Yubaba's strict hierarchical control. Lin protects Chihiro in the bathhouse against the existing power dynamics. Lin's forgotten identity embodies the fragmented identity the colonized individual faces, with subtle acts of kindness towards Chihiro, representing an identity shaped by suppression and a desire for freedom.

On the other hand, Haku's forgotten identity as the Kohaku River spirit parallels the colonial experience, where colonized individuals lose connection with their original identity. Yubaba constructs Haku's identity according to his needs and desires, thereby, controlling his past and future. Haku, disconnected from his origin, suffers the traumatic effects of personal erasure. He transforms himself into a dragon under Yubaba's order, thereby losing his identity further and reducing him to a creature of utility. This results in the commodification and dehumanization of colonized individuals who are appreciated only in use by the colonizers. Despite being a river spirit, Haku goes through psychological trauma imposed on him through colonization.

Throughout Chihiro's journey in the bathhouse, Haku is instrumental in helping Chihiro reserve her identity. His constant persisting nature helped Chihiro to hold onto her name to resist the colonizing force of the spirit world. Haku encouraging her to remember her identity demonstrates his loss and symbolizes an attempt by the colonized to preserve their identity even when Haku's has been erased. Haku assists Chihiro on her way back to the human world and shares his wish to unchain her from the bathhouse. Haku's character represents the notion of unhomeliness through his fragmented identity as Haku and his original identity as a river spirit. He also functions within a space where his origin haunts him within the bathhouse. Therefore, Haku's alienation from an imposed identity disconnects him from his origin and creates a sense of estrangement from himself.

Chihiro's journey in the film also epitomizes a colonized individual's journey towards reclamation of identity and self-discovery, underlying the existing complexities in the colonizer-colonized relationship. In the spirit world, Chihiro encounters Yubaba who attempts to reshape her identity as Sen and exploits her as forced labor. Imposing a new identity and suppressing her autonomy, renaming is considered a colonial mechanism, severing her connection with the colonized culture, values, and customs. Chihiro's response to the changes becomes a metaphor for resistance and reclamation of self in postcolonial situations. Chihiro initially faces fear and disorientation in the bathhouse, but gradually asserts her agency against the bathhouse's demands without submitting herself under their control. She perceives her identity as Sen as a state of temporality while she formulates her path toward freedom. This temporary state signifies resistance where she conforms to the colonizer's rules outwardly but keeps herself connected to the original identity, thereby subverting the colonizer's intention to erase it.

Throughout her journey, her alliance with other characters reflects the postcolonial solidarity and collective

resistance. Characters like Haku or Lin defied their prescribed roles to help Chihiro symbolizing the way colonized subjects find ways of resistance even under severe oppression. With Haku's guidance, she understands the importance of remembering her name, and memory. He comments, "If she steals your name, you'll never find your way home," (48:54) signifying the importance of remembering the origin. Therefore, through mutual support, the film portrays a reclamation of autonomy in a postcolonial setting, where experiences of subjugation are shared that empower individuals to challenge the colonizer's influence. Haku also recalls his identity at the end and says, "I have my name back" (1:58:38). This realization marks liberation from Yubaba's dominance.

Towards the film's end, Yubaba confronts Chihiro and asks her to identify her parents from the pig's group to free them. Chihiro demonstrates her confidence in her memory and identity and claims that none of the pigs are her parents. Despite, Yubaba's attempt to erase Chihiro's identity, she holds onto her sense of belonging and earns her freedom from the colonizer. As soon as she brings her parents to human form, she retains her connection with her past culture and customs. The retention in the human world embodies the journey of the colonized individuals who reclaim their identity by asserting their cultural memory against the colonizer's attempt at deletion. In conclusion, Chihiro's journey from disorientation to self-discovery exemplifies a postcolonial narrative of resilience in the face of colonization.

In conclusion, Chihiro's journey serves as an allegory for the struggles of colonized individuals to reclaim their culture, autonomy, and identity under oppressive control. The spirit world, with its rigid hierarchies, dehumanizing transformations, and renaming power exemplifies a colonial structure where identity is constructed to fulfill colonizer's purpose. Chihiro's ability to resist complete colonial domination, remember her identity, and bring her parents back to human form demonstrates her power of self-knowledge as tool of resistance. The film provides a narrative to the audience of discovery that reflects postcolonial struggle of identity retention in a system that seeks to suppress colonized autonomy and culture.

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