

A Post-Colonial Perspective on the Novel

Coonardoo: The Well in the Shadows

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Abstract

Literature acts as a storehouse for recording documents and facts that change with the time as humanity evolves. It is more of a barn that accumulates a wealth of information one cannot fathom, also it gives readers deep insights into the arenas which appears to be incomprehensible. Though there seem to be many kinds of literature, post-colonial literature is something fascinating and catches one's attention as it deals with many critical perspectives of writing; this helps change what has existed so far in history. This paper deals with the appropriation of the language of the colonizers to write back against them and to challenge them to bring to fruition their long-time revenge. This paper also focuses on how the once dominative and the supreme super powers of the world have set their ideology to civilize the world by calling it their duty and responsibility to shoulder the cause, thereby overlooking the nations other than them as uncivilized and uncouth compared to them. From the post-colonial perspective, the novel *Coonardoo* has deconstructed this age-old ideology of the whites and nullified the idea of a white man who will never ever fall in love with an aborigine.

Keywords: *Coonardoo*, post-colonial literature, western culture, eastern cultures,

Literature acts as a storehouse for recording documents and facts which change with time as humanity evolves. It is more of a barn that accumulates a wealth of information one cannot fathom, and it gives readers deep insights into the arenas which appear to be incomprehensible. Though there seem to exist many kinds of literature such as British Literature, American Studies, Indian Writing in English, Post-colonial literature is something very fascinating and catches one's attention as it deals with many critical perspectives, helping change what had existed in history so far.

Post-colonial literatures are literatures that are written after the colonial period and those that reflect the traumas and pathetic condition which the colonizers have left behind. There was a time when the writers of the colonized countries were trying to draw pictures of the predicaments they faced with respect to colonization, but slowly post-colonial literatures have started to employ styles and techniques which adopted a way of writing that enabled them to get back the rights which they lost to the empires. One such way of writing is the Appropriation of the

language which is to use the very same language that was taught to them and after nativizing it, to talk about their culture and traditions.

Above all they take the language that subjugates them and use that to challenge their oppressors. This is otherwise known as rewriting one's own history, the history that had been written all these years by the colonizers has now fallen into the hands of the natives themselves.

The novel spans several decades in the lives of the black aborigines and their white employers on Wyaliba, a remote cattle station in the harsh and arid region of North West Australia, owned and managed first by the tough widow, Bessie Watt, and later by her son, Hugh Watt. Underlying a complex and densely packed narrative is the story of the unspoken and unfulfilled love between Coonardoo and Hugh. In their childhood, they play and ride together as apparent equals, but when Hugh returns to Wyaliba after completing his education on the west coast, he is clearly the white master and she is the black servant. Although Coonardoo, in the meantime, has married Warieda, a leading tribesman, and has borne him children, her devotion to Hugh is unquestioning and wholehearted. To Hugh, however, love between the races is unthinkable. After Bessie Watts death, Hugh is stricken with grief and loneliness. Warieda, according to the tribal custom that allows a man to lend his wife to a friend, sends Coonardoo to comfort and console him. This is the only time that Hugh and Coonardoo make love. Coonardoo gives birth to Hughs son, Winni. Hugh, who by this time is married to Mollie, is secretly proud of the boy but takes great pains to conceal his paternity. This child fuels Hughs's separation from his wife. She packs herself and her daughters off to Perth but eventually the eldest daughter Phyllis, who feels an overwhelming attachment to the north-west, returns. As a frame for Coonardoo's own story, the use of black women by white men extends from the predatory Sam Geary who keeps mistresses in fine clothes, to the pearling luggers that travel the coast with black pearl on board; women to be used, until diseased, when they were discarded. Ending up, as discarded black pearl is Coonardoo's terrible fate, since she has no place to go after being sent away from Wyaliba where she has spent her entire life. Hugh ends up lonely and bitter on his station, when his daughter leaves to marry outside station life, she being the last person left who can be said to care for him.

From the post-colonial point of view, Mrs. Bettie is portrayed to be a very strong and assertive woman, working all her life away for the station. She is popularly called as Mumae by the aborigines of Wyaliba which means the master and the fatherly figure of the entire village. She treats the aborigines with a certain amount of respect for their culture and traditions, but also with a firm belief in her white superiority. Though she does not interfere in any of the customs of the aborigines, she is critical about the Australian aboriginal culture of early marriage and the puberty ceremony. She dictates to Warieda to marry Coonardoo only after she comes of age. In the very beginning of the novel, she is the Occident who tries to civilize the natives, trying to bring them under her care as she feels they need to be educated. The very action itself presents, the implication that Mrs Bettie believes her customs to be of higher value. These beliefs, in which Bettie holds, are constantly referred to as white woman's prejudices. Bettie also seems to speak with much ownership over the aboriginal people living on her station, constantly referring to them, and Coonardoo as her people or her natives. Thus Mrs. Bettie stands as a representation for the European thought process of civilizing the east.

Hugh appears to embrace and understand the ways and the traditions of the Aboriginal people, but it becomes evident in his treatment of Coonardoo and her people, that he does not recognize their equal stature with his own race on a psychological level. Aboriginal women in "Coonardoo" are considered inferior to white women. This is reflected in Hugh's wife Molly's treatment of Coonardoo and Meenie, in her insistence that they call her mam and behave as servants. In many instances, she shows hatred towards them and feels they are dirty and treacherous. She never lets her children be touched by any of them and she reprimands them if any of her children play with the aborigines. This is again proving the very idea that lords over the thought process of the colonizers and the whites who had made up their mind to think that the 'Others' were uncouth and uncivilized and they needed to be civilized. She has a very different way of looking at the aborigines than the rest of the white station people. Influenced by growing up in the town by the coast, she treats them as obviously beneath her and works them as slaves, in the belief she has the right to do so. In doing so, Mollie becomes the representation of the white view on aborigine life, in terms of 'otherness.' She acts the way she does, not out of malice, but out of the learned belief that she is above them. Her inability to give birth to a son sparks great frustration in the marriage, and she begins hating the life on Wyaliba. Finding out about Coonardoo's son Winni becomes her perfect excuse to return to her hometown and not see her husband whom she has come to loathe.

Hugh Watt as a child is active and playful, he does not feel above his aborigine friends and sees them as equal. As the story progresses however, the divide between the cultures seems to have become the divide within himself. He works hard to make it work on the station, but he is torn by his love for Coonardoo and the inevitable denial of that love. This makes his happiness with his wife impossible and thus becomes the reason behind his downfall. Though Hugh relies heavily on Coonardoo after his mother's demise, he is unable to express his love for Coonardoo publicly and the expectation of society ties his hand to openly take up Coonardoo as his wife. He treats her wrong all the ways possible, to set right his past of making love with an aborigine. This is his consciousness of being the Occident and thereby treating them as 'others'.

Towards the end of the novel, both Chitali and Hugh beat Bardi and Coonardoo after discovering their betrayal of having slept with Sam Geary. It is stated in the novel that this kind of treatment of a woman is accepted by Aboriginal men, and although it is acknowledged that Hugh's treatment of Coonardoo may have been quite harsh, it is also stated that Hugh was "within his rights" to behave as he did. This incident is the most painful in the story, but does prompt recollection of previous incidents where women have been mistreated. The incident in which Crossley and Geary come to have sexual relations with Bardi and Coonardoo was quite an invasive situation. Both men speak of the women as possessions when discussing who was going to have Coonardoo. There is also a sense that both women are resistant toward the men's advances, which is evident when Coonardoo hides herself, at the end of the house, and Bardi struggles with Crossley's advances. But their resistance is not one of an ordinary type, especially of Coonardoo's as she gives in to the physical invasion of Sam Geary because of the rejection, denial and ignorance which she has received from Hugh in her life, ever since his return to Wyaliba. Her resistance is a silent one filled with aggression and pain.

Though the novel ends in tragedy with Coonardoo being dead, Hugh's daughter and Bill Gale seemed to wonder if there is ever a chance for a white man to fall in love with a black woman. It is due to the reason of Hugh behaving strange and queer in the absence of Coonardoo, people of Wyaliba have come to believe Coonardoo's spirit has come over him. The novel acts as a pioneer work to break the false assumptions of the colonizers, where there can never be any bond of love or affection that could take place between people of different races. This novel is again a writ back against the colonizers using their own language by employing the natives' dialect to represent their culture, deconstructing the false prejudices of the Occident.

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