

The Portrayal of European and Colonized Native Women in Post-Colonial Literature

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Introduction

Post-Colonial literature consists of works written in English in formerly colonized societies, such as those found in Africa, India and the Caribbean. Within the realm of post-colonialist literature, the portrayal of women's roles and experiences are approached with varying levels of authenticity, depth and success. Looking at the gendered history of colonialism, with emphasis given to the colonial and imperial histories of Africa, India and the Caribbean, stark contrasts between the typical European ideal and the representation of the 'colonized' or 'native' female appear. The seeming necessity to protect the plain, submissive European ideal from the sensuality or savagery associated with the often shallow portrayal of a native woman is a common theme in post-colonial literature. Traditional roles taken up by women, sometimes seen as distasteful by colonial European standards, can be considered a form of rebellion against such colonial rule. The depth afforded to the portrayal of women in more modern works provides a clearer picture than those works that superficially seek to characterize colonized women.

Approaches

By selecting and analyzing a variety of texts within the range of post-colonial literature the commonalities concerning how women were portrayed to varying degrees emerged. Through a feminist approach, these differing levels of authenticity, characterization, and implemented stereotypes are analyzed in a manner that determines the different ways in which women, both European and colonized native, are represented. For the most part, post-colonial authors historically characterize women only superficially, without any manner of depth beyond preconceived stereotypes and cautionary character traits. Examples of this superficiality can be seen in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. Although later attempts seek to do more justice to the characterization of both European and native women, these attempts also fall short of the mark, as seen in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*. The most successful, authentic characterizations of women appear in more modern works, such as Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. By reading and analyzing a variety of post-colonial works, these levels of characterization emerge and highlight the limits of such works by providing insight into the restricted points of view and misunderstandings maintained by early post-colonial society.

Conclusions

The portrayal of women, both in their relations to men and their relations to each other, are approached with increasing levels of depth in works of post-colonial literature. Earlier works, such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, provide only the most superficial representations of African and Indian females, respectively. Their characterization of native women stem from false stereotypes that only function to sexualize and other their characters. This superficiality is not limited to only their portrayal of the native women but to European women as well, despite their best efforts to convey the ultimate virtuosity and character possessed by the European ladies present. While they appear to demonize the native women through sexualization and embellished savagery, they are simultaneously highlighting the shallowness surrounding the European ideal of a proper woman which bears no distinguishing traits beyond plainness, submissiveness and moral fastidiousness. The concept of the "Angel in the House" is nearly as damaging a stereotype as that of the sensual and exotic indigenous female.

In other works of post-colonial literature, such as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, E.M. Forster's *Passage to India* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, there are significant attempts to portray women in a more unbiased and in-depth manner. While these works endeavor to portray European and colonized native women more astutely, the relationships and characters formed remain superficial. In contrast to the works of Conrad and Kipling, the women in these three works appear to be more involved in the events of their respective narratives but never seem to breach the typecasts that define them. The European women present in the colonies cannot see anything outside of what they believe that colony and its peoples to be while the native women are constantly compared to their English counterparts. While there is the appearance of some depth, these narratives never take the plunge into fully developing a comprehensive understanding and explanation of the native females and their behaviors. For instance, in Cary's *Mister Johnson*, Johnson's wife, Bamu, often leaves the poor office clerk to return to her family in the bush, yet the narrative never follows her, or any of the other natives in the story, to their domain in any attempt to better convey their culture or explain their behaviors. Rather, these narrative remain within the realm of the European domain that is present.



Works, like those of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, manage to portray women in an in-depth and accurate manner through developed characterizations and balanced portrayals of the effects and influences that European colonization has had upon those that colonized and those that were colonized. These more modern works shed light into the portrayal of females by showing the impacts and disparities that colonialism and imperialism have created for them. The depth established within the portrayal of women in these more modern works provides a clearer picture than those works that superficially sought to characterize colonized native women.

Historical Context

Before 1880, the old empires of Spain and Portugal were diminished to practically nothing, and Britain and France were the only countries to possess colonies of any significance. With the exception of India, crucial for British trade and political prestige, and Algeria, which France took 50 years to subdue, neither of these countries devoted much time or attention to their empires. However, after 1880, European powers, predominately led by Britain and France, transformed this laidback approach to empire into a highly competitive race to control the world. This competition led to a scramble for Africa, which in turn led to much of the continent coming under European control. However, European powers in Africa generally relied on the help of indigenous elites due to possessing neither the manpower nor the resources to fully control these new colonies on their own.

These colonial conquests typically meant atrocious forms of violence were unleashed against indigenous peoples. For instance, after King Leopold II claimed the Congo region, Belgian colonists subjected native people to unspeakable brutalities, such as murdering or mutilating those that were unwilling to harvest rubber for the large Belgian companies operating there. Many indigenous peoples were subjugated to disease, harsh treatment, overwork, and malnutrition. The British were likewise responsible for widespread suffering in South Africa, India, and Jamaica, among other colonial domains.

This unprecedented, often violent, grab for colonies most likely stemmed from a combination of political, economic, and cultural motives. One of the most prominent reasons for imperialism was the growing competition between industrialized countries for natural resources and raw materials crucial to new advances in technology but that were largely unavailable in Europe. In the late nineteenth century, colonies also brought prestige to the mother country and secured its standing as a great power. This growing nationalism provided even more motive to the European colonization agenda.

Indigenous people and practices did not only help shape imperial conquest and colonial policy, they also shaped European society at home. Through literature, Europeans had the opportunity to live vicariously through those writing in the colonies. However, the adventures and escapades found in post-colonial literature often grossly misrepresented indigenous peoples and only served to solidify already conceived stereotypes. This literature was soon transferred into the advertising of colonial products, such as rubber, tin, and coffee. These advertisements used stereotyped, often racist, images of Asians and Africans to present the products, which only furthered the misconceptions surrounding indigenous people and furthered the othering of colonized natives.



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The Rhodes Colossus Striding from Cape Town to Cairo, Punch, 10 December 1892.
In the Rubber Coils. Scene – The Congo 'Free' State, Punch, 28 November 1906.

