

A Postcolonial Reading of D.H Lawrence “Snake” and Gwendolyn Brooks “We Real Cool”

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Abstract

Postcolonialism is a term that has been exposed to thorough studies and has broader interpretations than is frequently thought of. It designates a period that came into being after colonialism from its prefix “post”, but it also deals with the period before and during the period of colonization. Postcolonial theory is one principal narrative that explains all forms of oppression. Colonialism was constructed on the hegemony of the Eurocentric where the Western culture is at the center of all civilizations and the non-European lands are at the periphery and considered to be the margins. All the cultures of the world are placed in such a manner that they are before or after other civilizations. This results in a building of series of binaries like the Self and the Other, Centre and Margin, Culture and Nature. The study has as findings that the colonial structure and education presented by the colonialist as superior in D. H. Lawrence “Snake” and Gwendolyn Brooks’ “We Real Cool” are being question and criticized by the same people they try to influence, hypnotize and brainwash.

Keywords- Postcolonial, Culture, Self, Other, Civilization

Introduction

Colonization required people to stay out of their homelands either through slavery or economic necessity. They made a community of slaves in the foreign land and after colonization, it was difficult to go back to their homeland and they were forced to stay where they were considered minorities. As a result of colonization and ‘decolonization’ many people availed themselves with the atmosphere of new places like the “New Africa” (Colonized Africa), England and America where they had to balance themselves no matter the situation.

Moving away from their land caused displacement, cultural depression and uncertainty in the settlers leading to identity crisis. The realization that arose out of it was complex and hybrid, a

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meeting of Eurocentric and non-western cultures that advanced as a result of colonialism. For the postcolonialists, it was a movement from the margins to the centers providing openings to settle in the U.S. and the U.K. This movement from the margins to the center affected the psyche of the individual displaced from his homeland, family, history and past. The 'postcolonial' covers the nonstop consequences of colonialism on the 'previously' colonized cultures like in the case of the persona in the poems of D.H. Lawrence and Gwendolyn Brooks

Postcolonial Reading of D.H Lawrence's "Snake"

D.H Lawrence poem "Snake" can be read from a postcolonial perspective. This is because Postcolonialism strives for a very strong resistance to the former colonizer. It also assumes that the writers who write back to the center are representing their society authentically. Dennis Walder has elaborated that: "Postcolonial theory is needed because it has a subversive posture towards the canon, in celebrating the neglected or marginalized, bringing with it a particular politics, history and geography" (60). This means that Postcolonialism celebrates those who are considered as the "Other". It rebels against what is claimed to be standard, as it questions the level of standardization and the makers of such standards. Lawrence in the poem "Snake" undermines the claim made by his civilization. The speaker of this poem judges all the set principles placed on him and retains what he is experiencing at the forefront. Lawrence sees the Roman culture as a destroyer of his civilization and ideology and decides to revive it by presenting the speaker's admiration of the snake.

D. H. Lawrence wrote the poem Snake in the early 1920s in which he reverses the Christian myth of the snake. "Snake" is a narrative poem that uses metaphors and symbolism to express Lawrence's ideas about religion throughout history. The poem is written in free verse and has no specific rhyming pattern. In this poem, Lawrence digs deeper and discovers that the presentation of the snake in the Roman culture is not what it is to him. To him, the snake is a beautiful representation of nature. It becomes a light in the darker underworld. Lawrence, in the concluding lines of the poem, takes us to the after world far darker than what we receive at the beginning of the poem.

The snake, which is considered the lord of the Underworld, is encountered by the persona at the water-trough— they stare at each other, but the reptile retreats into the unpleasant black hole. The persona, the man, is overcome by disgust and throws a log at the snake; which quickly creeps back into the shelter. The dangerous encounter is devoted with a mythical beauty and significance. The 'Voice of education' suggests he relies on the tradition of trusting the mind more than the feelings. The man grows apologetic and finds reasons for his submission to the voice of destruction. In the language which evokes the New Testament, the persona confesses that he disobeys the old tradition of hospitality and watches the snake in regret. The persona implies that the snake belongs to the world of

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the night, dreams, the dark and the unconscious as it has come 'from a fissure' from the burning bowels of the earth. The snake also represents the emotional life which is to be treated peacefully.

The poem delineate an answer to the condition of the people that asserts that the imperialists construct their culture and think it is greater than that of the colonized—impose it on them and mocking theirs to be superstitious and disdainful. Postcolonial resistance is a means of writing back to the colonial mindset. In the poem "Snake", we see Lawrence writing back to the colonial mindset on their presentation of the snake. He deconstructs the Christian representation of the snake by challenging the biblical interpretation. In Christian mythology, snakes are seen as symbols of evil and chaos from the underworld. Christianity presents the snake as a symbol of temptation, enemy, betrayal and deception. In Christianity, seeing snakes in the dream relates to trials and tests that Christians are experiencing in their lives or their relationship with God. Snake is also seen by most Christians as an evil or monitoring spirit. By admiring the snake that is attributed with all bad qualities, Lawrence is writing back to the Centre that their perception of the snake is not the same like in other cultures. The speaker tells us that black snakes in Sicily are seen as "innocent, [and] the gold are venomous" (line 25). This is an indication that the poet believes that black snakes are harmless.

In the African culture, snakes are very useful as they are seen as food and also used as cure to other problems. Jacques Derrida in "Plato Pharmacy" talks of the 'pharmakon' (drugs) which has a dual meaning to 'cure' and to 'poison'. In this same light, the snake should not only be looked at as universally bad because a culture says that, rather, it should be looked at from all angles. It is a source of food cure and protector to the Africans and also poison and deception in other cultures. If the word of one culture is taken without any questioning, the pharmakon will become hypnotize. Lawrence uses the duality of the snake in this poem to show that the image of the snake is both positive and negative.

A snake sheds its skin and is recreated, just as the persona in Lawrence's "Snake" sheds his formal dress and confronts the snake in his pajamas. But education and social conventions overruled, that poisonous snakes must be killed and brave men should undertake the task. For the briefest moment, the persona lacked the faith of his own perception, and thus missed his chance "with one of the lords/Of Life.

Lawrence's genuine affection for the Sicilian way of life encourages him to revive that glorious buried race to a renowned recognition and identity. The poet counts the new meaning and tries to locate the racial identity through his mythical experience. Though the other voice tells him to "take a stick and break him down" (line 27), the persona because of his culture portrays his love for the snake when he says "But I must confess how I liked him/ how glad I was he had come like a guest

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in quiet, to drink at my water-trough (line 28-29). By doing this, the persona rejects the religion and education that wants to limit his ideology and admiration for nature.

Furthermore, the neoclassicist idea that life is a chain that constitutes God, Angles, Man, Plants and Animals then Stones is deconstructed in this poem. Christian ideology has placed man above all other creatures which brings about the Centre and the margin relationship. Man is placed at the Centre while other creatures at the periphery. In the book of Genesis, after God created everything, He is said to have given man dominion over every other creature. This ideology has caused man to behave irrationally toward other creatures because they see themselves as superior. In the poem, the persona tell us that “and the voice in [him] said, if you were a man/ you will take a stick and break him down” (line 26-27). From the above quote, it is evident that being man is superior and being animal is inferior. This Christian ideology is deconstructed as the persona feels so honoured by the presence of the snake. He sees the snake as a gentle, sweet and harmless creature.

Postcolonialism, deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies. It has a clearly chronological meaning, designating the post-independence period from the late 1970s. The term has been used by critics to denote the various cultural effects of colonization. In the poem, the persona has been affected by his colonial education which tells him that snakes are bad and harmful, therefore, they must be killed. This education causes him to “pick up a clumsy log and threw it at the water-trough”. The persona at one point is being influence by his “accursed human education”, which doesn’t see the positive aspect of a snake, but makes the learner look at it only from a negative perspective. This education makes him to act as per what he is thought and not what he sees as a reaction of the snake. The persona confesses that he regrets his action as he later relies on his blood and not brain knowledge. There is tension represented in the persona's divided feelings about the snake. He is both honored by the snake's presence and horrified. Even his actions are conflicting. He humbly waits for the snake to finish its drink and then aggressively throws a log at it in disrespect. His encounter with the snake does not indicates that the snake is harmful in anyway, yet his idea of what he has been taught about snakes forces him to act contrary to the way they snake acted. At this point, he does not trust the snake because of what his Christian education has forced him to look at a snake from their lenses: the snake tempted Jesus and convinced Eve to eat the fruit etc. therefore, the snake is bad, cunning and destructive.

From the preceding analysis, one can see that Lawrence deconstructs the education given him by his religion and colonial education. The persona does not only believe in the blood knowledge impacted on him but goes further to deconstruct the myth of the authoritative discourse which limits people to think out of the box. The fact that the persona takes a longer time to admire the snake

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indicates his admiration for it. After throwing a log and the snake, he is not attacked by the snake. This makes him to blame and accuse his education for making him believe what is not true about a snake.

Postcolonial Reading of Gwendolyn Brooks “We Real Cool”

Gwendolyn Brooks in her poem “We Real Cool” records the influence of city life. She does not completely blame the city for what happens to people; rather, she sees the city as a prevailing force with which people must deal with. Brooks focuses on physical uprising and spiritual rebellion. The poem gives humanistic and sympathetic indications of black life as she presents the black youths in the Golden Shovel battling with the challenges of their society. This poem is grounded in a consciousness of race and identity as it perfectly reflects what and how blacks felt and feel about racial issues in the country.

Brooks paints a realistic image of youths growing up in the city. To her, there is bound to be uncertainty and confusion about one’s correct identity in city life. This results in high rates of poverty, unemployment and crime, as well as racism and discrimination. As such, youths are forced to deal with those problems of everyday life, which is why most of them will end up isolating themselves passionately from their environments.

Postcolonial approach deals with literature produced in countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries. It may also deal with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies or their peoples as its subject matter. The theory is based on concepts of otherness and resistance. In the poem “We Real Cool”, Brooks fervently presents the misfortune that the black race is going through in the American society. Her poem is a call for the blacks to return back to their values and traditions and take pride in their race. This poem is also writing back to the dominant culture that the blacks exist and should be treated fairly because the discrimination makes them to find new identities of stopping school and seeking pleasures in the pool, where they strike, sing, drink and sin. Brooks projects the torture, abuse and torment the underprivileged youths go through so that the Centre should be conscious that the subalterns too can speak and want to be heard.

What Brooks present in this poem is common in all the societies today in which we see youths abandoning school because of the conditions of their societies and engage themselves in criminal acts of smoking, gambling and even killing. The youths no longer see education as a means of survival. They see it as a cage in which their liberty and ideas are locked in. In order to come out of this cage, they decide to stop school and live their lives the way they want. This is a form of resistance to the Western norm which sees education as a key to success. The seven pool players think with or without education, they will one day die; rather than dying as a slave who is restricted from doing so

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many things, it is better to break the rules, live your life the way you want and still die. These category of youths no longer see any value of life or education because they embrace the constructs of the society.

The stereotype about blacks being animals, brutes, rapists, murderers, wild, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling is reviewed in this poem. This stereotype does not only destroy blacks but also limit their opportunities to express themselves socially, economically, sexually and individually. This stereotype causes them to fashion an identity for themselves by working together. This communal aspect is seen in the poem through the use of the pronoun 'we'. Unlike the western culture that focuses on individualism, the 'unblemished' blacks have it as a culture of working together. The title of the poem is ironical as it presents youths who are being disillusioned by the happenings in their society. These ills to them can only be overcome through working together.

The term 'Postcolonial' affirms and promotes the need to analyze and resist continuing colonial attitudes. There is a great shift of perspective on the part of writers who strongly feel that their story is to be articulated by none other than themselves. In Brooks' poem "We Real Cool", the readers no longer believe the "cool" attitude of the pool players. They do not seem to be frank about their feelings, probably not even towards themselves. It does not mark a group of strong individuals but rather covers the insecurity of every one of them. This is quite obvious, given that the emphasis lies on the action that is referred to, while its subject stays in the background. At last, the poem ends with the boys' vision of an early death, which is not physical but "a mental or a moral or a spiritual death".

Edward Said's *Orientalism* observes how the Western image of the Orient is built by generations of writers and scholars, who thus legitimized imposing penetration and control. He defines 'Orientalism' as: "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). In Brooks' poem, the young men are affected by the control of the dominant class. In order to show themselves as men who are 'real cool', they question the Western ideology of school as a means of survival and success. They come up with their own idea of working together, singing jazz (which they identify with), smoking and drinking. By doing this, they resist surrendering under the social pressure and subsequently struggle to live up to their own expectations. While some youths will welcome and live the way society will want them to (by going to school and acting right), this seven pool players resist the idea of going to school and "living right". They disagree with the white ideas and mindset by carrying their new identity to the extremes. These youths gain power by applying their own idea and making it known to the people at the Centre.

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Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool" represents the underprivileged youths who want to find their place in a society that has ignored them by living the way they want and not the way society expects of them. They get involve in strike, sin, drinking and smoking because of the discrimination in their society. This discrimination blinds them from seeing anything valuable in education certainly because they may not get any better with the education as their race and class may not permit them. By presenting this, Brooks is encouraging the oppressed youths to work together because it is only through their collaboration that they can take over the Centre, create their own identity and be recognized.

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