

The Future of Colonialism in Australian Indigenous Fiction – A Psychoanalytic Study of Trauma in *The Swan Book* and *Terra Nullius*

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Abstract—The goal of this study is to examine the colonial concerns depicted in the futuristic Australian fictions *Terra Nullius* and *The Swan Book*. *The Swan Book*, a 2013 Australian novel by Alexis Wright, digs deeply into subjects like climate catastrophes and the repressive condition of the natives in a future Australia. Claire G. Coleman's fantasy novel *Terra Nullius*, on the other hand, presents a futuristic Australia in which many colonial themes are subtly and implicitly depicted. This research article aims to emphasize the aftermath effects of colonization and to put together how they are thinking about Australia's problems in the future by analyzing the two novels of these indigenous authors using important psychoanalytic theories. This study also highlights the impact of magic realism in these texts.

Index Terms—colonialism, post traumatic stress disorder, indigenous people, magic realism

I. INTRODUCTION

This article is organized around a significant topic in the Australian context known as “The Great Australian Silence”. Edward Stanner coined the phrase, which stresses how the people often remain silent despite seeing the injustice and inhumane deeds committed against Australian aborigines. This “silence” has been broken by many Australian authors and particularly the indigenous authors are quite conscious of this problem. According to a recent survey, only 3.3% of Australians are indigenous, thus the topic of what comes next for them is crucial. Hopefully, these two novels hypothesize some of the problems they may face in the future. The “Great Australian Silence” refers to the silence around the sufferings of the indigenous population. The logical writings of the native Australian authors, however, shatter this stillness.

The purpose of this essay is to highlight the potential problems that the aboriginal people are going to face in the future. The plot of the novel *The Swan Book* is about a mute teenage girl Oblivia Ethylene who is a gang-raped victim and she is looked after by a refugee woman Bella Donna and also this novel primarily focuses on the state of the Australian indigenous people in future who are forcibly pushed to live in a swamp. Moreover, it also speculates an Australian Aboriginal president in future. On the other hand, Claire G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius* proclaims that the Australian native inhabitants can be tormented and subjugated. She also insists that there is a huge possibility that the native children will be treated as slaves in future. Indigenous people are traumatized by events like physical abuse, childhood trauma and psychological trauma. In both these texts, the indigenous people are mostly traumatized physically and psychologically.

These two novels can be categorized under speculative fiction which deals with subjects like ghosts, aliens, supernatural elements, science fiction and so on but these novels emphasize the Australian future. Speculative fiction encompasses a broad range of genres like science fiction, gothic fiction, supernatural elements and cyberpunk novels. Oziewicz (2017) argues that “speculative fiction” can be categorized into many different varieties which will depart from the “consensus reality” (p.1). The research article is structured in three parts in which the first part deals with the psychoanalytic study of the novels, the second part is a brief analysis of the magical realistic perspectives and the final part discusses oppression and violation in futuristic Australia.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gleeson-White (2016) in her research article “Country and Climate Change in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*”, affirms about the climatic issues depicted in the future Australia in *The Swan Book*.

Renes's (2021) article “Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*: Indigenous-Australian Swansong or Songline?”, explicates various issues indicated in the novel and it also focuses on bringing a better future to the native inhabitants.

In the article titled “Going viral: The Swan Book by Alexis Wright”, Gleeson-White (2013) narrates the climatic issues indicated in this novel and this article emphasizes how the past works of Alexis Wright have differed from this fiction.

Singeot (2021) in the article “The Swamp and Desert Tropes in Post-Apocalyptic Australian Indigenous Fiction: The Swan Book (2013) by Alexis Wright and Terra Nullius (2018) by Claire Coleman”, scrutinized the desert and the climatic degradation effect in both these novels.

These are some of the articles which primarily highlighted various themes in these futuristic Australian texts. But this article aims to blend the effect of psychoanalysis and magic realism implemented in these novels to profoundly insist on the futuristic issues narrated by these authors.

III. A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF *THE SWAN BOOK* AND *TERRA NULLIUS*

Anamorphosis is a technique implemented by Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis which insists that a distorted vision gives a clear picture for anamorphic images. In research projects, this approach is also applied to the field of literature. This article makes the case that by approaching these two futuristic novels from a different perspective; we can gain a lot of fresh insights into the perspectives of the indigenous people. A critical study is essential to interpret the texts. If we read a book from a psychoanalytic perspective, we can critically analyze the text. For instance, if we read fiction from an uncritical perspective, we may only learn the tale of the fiction.

Alexis Wright and Claire G. Coleman, who belong to the Waanyi and Noongar indigenous cultures respectively, wrote the futuristic fictions *The Swan Book* and *Terra Nullius*. Although Alexis Wright is most known for her books *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria*, in which she wrote about the painful consequences of colonization, she distinguished the future from the past in *The Swan Book* by speculating on future problems that might be seen through a psychoanalytic lens or in other words by a distorted viewpoint from an ordinary perception by using Lacan’s ‘Anamorphosis’ technique. In Australian literature, indigenous Australian writers like Alexis Wright and Claire G. Coleman envisioned a future for the indigenous people in Australia. Indigenous futurism can be found in a variety of media, such as books, movies, comic books, video games, and more. For instance, Afrofuturism which makes predictions about the native African population, also emphasizes the highly developed technological and cultural characteristics of the African people and it is exemplified by Ryan Coogler in his *Black Panther*. Afrofuturism primarily stressed the black African future in which people live with improved technology and rich cultural values. The same similar assumption applies to Australia, a wealthy country for settlers but one where the indigenous population still lacks privileges. Australian futuristic literature addresses problems including climatic degradation and the stolen generation. These books are primarily categorized under speculative fiction, which may not directly allude to the oppressive effects of settler colonialism but instead gives a symbolic importance. *The Swan Book* by Alexis Wright and *Terra Nullius* by Claire G. Coleman may not directly address colonial themes, but both these books convey a strong message through magical and fantasy components.

Alexis Wright is a famous writer and she is predominantly known for winning the Miles Franklin Award for her novel *Carpentaria* in 2006. *The Swan Book* deals with the story of Oblivia Ethylene, a female protagonist who experiences the trauma of sexual assault and violence right from the start of the book. She is a survivor of gang rape who is working to move on from the horror of her past. Bella Donna, a refugee woman engaged in what is known as a traumatic transference in psychoanalysis, in which she expressed her feelings regarding the indigenous earlier trauma in the past. Transference is a condition in psychoanalytic dynamics when the patient’s emotion is passed on to the recipient. Positive and negative transference can be used to categorize this. In the case of Bella Donna, she conveys her past terrible experiences to the populace and insists on protecting their possessions from those in authority. This is communicated to the populace in the swamp and is implied as a sign of warning in this fiction. This is the speculation of the author which is conveyed through Bella Donna and this can be justified by the words of Renes (2021), “Slow violence informs the academic and political debate on Aboriginal dispossession, displacement, dispersal and assimilation, in which colonization (and now neo-colonization) is described as either benign or destructive” (p.2).

Although in Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book*, we could derive a lot of potential issues indicated by the author like climatic degradation, environmental hazards, sexual harassment and oppression; we can apply several psychoanalytic theories to critically interpret it which are applicable to speculate about the possible issues in future. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a mental state that happens due to the traumatic events which happened in the past. It may happen due to the overthinking of flashbacks, severe traumatic events and so on. In this fiction, Oblivia suffers from traumatic experiences and could be a victim of this PTSD. The protagonist is victimized and sexually assaulted by some petrol-sniffing youths and also she is abducted by Warren Finch who is about to be the future aboriginal president of Australia. This emphasizes the pathetic condition of the indigenous women in Australia who are obnoxious with their insecurity. Oblivia is depicted as a mute and dumb girl which is the representation of the voiceless indigenous people. The novel revolves around two major characters Oblivia and Bella Donna, in which Bella Donna recollects the past traumas of the indigenous people through her stories which is a psychological aspect to retrieve the past sufferings of the aborigines about how they are mutilated and violated and to warn them about the present scenario. In this regard, we could find that even in the future, the aborigines are still threatened. Wright (2016) in *The Swan Book* stresses the condition of the natives in the fiction, “The swamp now renamed Swan Lake was nothing special. It was the same as dozens of fenced

and locked Aboriginal detention camps. Only starving skin-and-bone people with hollow-eye children who refused to speak came off those trucks and Army buses” (p.43).

On the other hand, Claire G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius* elaborately discusses the issues of the slavery system in Australia. Claire G. Coleman is a Noongar Australian writer and she was awarded the 'black&write! indigenous writing fellowship' for her debut novel *Terra Nullius*. As the author belongs to the Noongar aboriginal sector she could connect this fiction with her own life in which she reformulates the cultural trauma which is embedded in her mind. This could be argued with the intensity of her novel as the novel begins with the uncertainty of the protagonist Jacky who tries to escape from the camp. He has a quest for his identity and he runs away from the settlers throughout the novel which highly reconnects the past traumas of the indigenous people. In the words of Fanon (2008), “We understand now why the black man cannot take pleasure in his insularity. For him there is only one way out, and it leads into the white world” (p.36). The inter-generational trauma is brought into the fiction by the author that is all about the intensity of the traumatic incidents which affected the whole life of their ancestors. Hook (2009) in his article “A Critical Psychology of the Postcolonial” expressed the psychological issues undergone by the native black people in terms of cultural, physical, epistemic and psychic violence (p.2). This can be interconnected with *Terra Nullius* which is set in the futuristic Australia which bewilders the readers about the future of Australia as there are multiple potential issues indicated by the author like the stolen generation, climatic degradation and the slavery system. The pertinent aspect of the novel is that it highlights that Australia is colonized by the aliens referred to as ‘Toads’ which highly offers the readers to speculate about the issues in future. One might neither believe nor be familiar with the aliens and other such aspects but the point here is that the imagination of the native writer and she tries to insist that the native inhabitants will be affected in one or the other way and this speculative fiction highlights that the native children will be treated as slaves in future. This is an unconscious effect of colonization which happened in the past which the author tries to ‘transfer’ to the readers perhaps in an underlying way. Certain incidents are not explicit in this indigenous futuristic fiction but the intensity of the issue emphasized by Claire G. Coleman is a soaring one. In the words of Hook (2009), “Fanon’s linking of psychology and politics is at its most forceful here, in his understanding of colonialism as not only a means of appropriating land and territory, but of appropriating culture and history themselves, that is, as a way of appropriating the means and resources of identity, and hence affecting powerful forms psychic distress and damage” (p. 9). Colonization can be not only taken as a means of violence, subjugation and oppression but rather the psychological dominance of the colonizers played a crucial role in their dominance and this aspect plays a pertinent role in modern-day colonization. This psyche of the colonizers/settlers is displayed in the futuristic perception where the native children are treated as slaves and this pertinently asserts that the slavery system will be there in future. Characters like sister Bagra and the antagonist Devil are ruthless that they deliberately tormented the native children who are brought up as slaves. The children are treated by sister Bagra mercilessly and they are ill-treated and also not provided with good food.

IV. THE IMPACT OF MAGIC REALISM

Magic realism focuses on fantasy, supernatural, and other such themes. *Midnight Children* by Salman Rushdie is a work of Indian literature that incorporates magic realism into a work of postcolonial literature. Magical realism is an element outside of reality that draws readers into a completely different environment. The employment of magic realism in fiction nowadays is utilized to describe probable future problems that can be seen as the worrying signs for the future. *The Swan Book* by Alexis Wright contains several magical realistic aspects that help us to predict the problems that will arise in the future. For instance, the role of genies, speaking monkey and the ghost of Bella Donna can be categorized under the magic realism theme. This could be argued with the words of Wright (2016) in *The Swan Book*, “The Harbour Master was missing his monkey friend who lived in an overseas country and who he claimed was a genius of world politics” (p.34). The spirit of Bella Donna helps Olivia to come out of her troubles and this is one of the major magic realistic aspects in this novel. The black swans in this fiction allegorically refer to the indigenous people in Australia. Australian psychoanalyst Alison Ravenscroft stresses the significance of magic realism in postcolonial fictions. In the words of Ravenscroft (2012), “What are the literary practices and histories to which Australian critics refer when they produce Indigenous-signed texts as magic realist? It quickly becomes clear that magic realism has been taken up in the name of literary postcolonialism’s interests in the possibilities of reading and writing difference between the coloniser and the colonised” (p.61).

Similarly in *Terra Nullius*, the indigenous author Claire G. Coleman incorporated a lot of fantasy elements to tell the story of a futuristic Australia and, more importantly, to recall the previous horrific events that the native indigenous people of Australia had to go through. This fiction makes an allegory of settler colonialism and features science fiction elements like space and aliens. The author uses the term “Toads” to refer to the alien species that are the settlers in futuristic Australia. The interesting aspect of this fiction is that the “Toads” did not differentiate the Australian people as natives and settlers and all the humans are equal before the aliens. This apocalyptic state expressed in the novel can be argued with the words of Lejeune S. (2019), “Stories like these, from Aboriginal authors like Coleman, are important to rebalance the story of Australia’s history and acknowledged the enduring trauma of living in an apocalyptic world” (p.2).

V. EXPLOITATION IN FUTURE

A. Climatic Degradation

In *The Swan Book*, the first chapter of the book is titled 'Dust Cycle' in which the protagonist Oblivia and other refugees are in search of a hospitable land which emphasizes the futuristic scenario of Australia. The lives of the aboriginal people are crumbled due to the climatic effect and also due to the strict measures of the army. Bella Donna and other refugees are forced to live in a swamp. The novel also intensifies the state of the lakes in Australia which are polluted due to the climatic effects. The first chapter of the novel alludes to the apocalyptic scenario as the country is affected by various natural disasters like dust storm, floods and fire. Although they are highly affected by natural catastrophes, the aboriginal people are very much attached to their lands and they are not ready to leave their lands which were the belongings of their ancestors. This novel also intensifies the impact of polluted water as it is stressed by the author that the people are affected with bellyache after drinking the contaminated water in the lake. In the words of Gleeson-White (2013), "The Swan Book is Wright's most ambitious novel to date. If *Plains of Promise* is about the fate of three women severed from their ancestral land and Carpentaria is about a community's battle to prevent the mining of its ancestral land, *The Swan Book* is concerned with the entire Earth" (p.8). Similarly, Claire G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius* also deeply digs about the climatic issues like lack of rain, instability in farming and the state of desert trope regions in the future.

B. Stolen Generation

Stolen Generation is the act of forcibly removing the children from the parents of the indigenous people and they were brought up in camps or perhaps the 'foster parents'. This method was indeed adopted by the European settlers to primarily eliminate the aboriginal 'hybrid' generation and also to eradicate their identity and culture. The abolition of the aboriginal identity is the major goal of this act. This is profoundly problematized in *Terra Nullius* in which the native children are forcibly taken away from their parents and are brought up as slaves for the 'Toads'. This could be argued with the words of Krieken (1999), "The relationship between European and Indigenous Australian children has broader significance because the removal of Aboriginal children was centrally a 'civilizing project', despite the fact that the subsequent critique of that practice is also undertaken in the name of 'civilization'" (p.4). Although this is not widely expressed in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*, her previous novel *Plains of Promise* intensified this issue as this fiction is about Ivy Koopundi who is born in St. Dominic's, a missionary for aboriginals who is taken away from her mother long back when she was a child. This novel also problematized the issues of the half-caste children. Cultural trauma is reflected in most of the novels of Alexis Wright. Similarly, Claire G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius* brings the cultural trauma back here in this novel which recollects all sorts of traumatic experiences like physical violence, psychological trauma, cultural degradation, and so on. This cultural trauma is deeply embedded in the minds of the aboriginal people is carried away from one generation to the next and this memory turns into an inter-generational trauma.

C. Oppression and Violation

The major theme in both these novels is oppression. The protagonists of these fictions are extremely tormented by the oppressors which insist that the oppression might happen in future but rather in different aspects as Oblivia is sexually assaulted and Jacky is troubled with the slavery system. In *The Swan Book*, the very own native people are forced to live in swamps and they are deprived of the privileges. This indicates the pitiable state of the natives and the significant point to be noted is that even an aboriginal president could not save them in the future as he is a puppet of the authority. This is the cultural trauma expressed by the indigenous author Alexis Wright. The female protagonist is dumb and mute and she is not accepted anywhere after the rape. Although she does not have dialogues to express her trauma, her character arc gives the readers a great impact indeed. A reference can be made to Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2005) in which she addressed the issues of the native women and how they were treated as she indicated that from the beginning of colonialism women were treated as 'conquered lands' (p.129). Alexis Wright's previously published novels too dealt with the sexual violence endured by the aboriginal women. For instance, her *Plains of the Promise* significantly dealt with the issues concerned with the native women. It can be argued with the words of Ravenscroft (2012),

In the course of these few sentences, the point of view has shifted suddenly to indirect discourse, carrying Jipp's interior voice to us and bringing with it a disconcerting intimacy with his pleasure too; pulling a reader into the field of his desires, with all the disturbance that this might evoke in many readers. We begin by looking upon the girl's rape from a position outside the act but we are then positioned with Jipp, looking at the girl through his eyes (p.49).

Similarly in Claire G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius* many fantasy elements are introduced by the author to engage the readers into a futuristic world but the ultimate goal of the author is to convey the past traumatic experience of the colonized through fantasy fiction which also alarms the natives about their future. *Terra Nullius* insists that the impact of colonization is not over but rather it prolongs with the issues like the quest for identity, abolition of the rights and so on. The distinguished aspect of this novel is that it is not explicit about the 'whiteness' or settler colonialism but rather it significantly focuses on the colonial issues in future with the usage of science fiction and fantasy elements. For instance, 'Toads' are the aliens who are the dominators in the novel which is not a real living species but it alludes to the settlers who were dominant during the colonization of Australia and also the natives are referred to as 'savages' which can be interconnected with the British imperialism who pretended that they were there to 'civilize' the people.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article encompasses a broad study of Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* and Claire G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius* in which the ultimate objective is to scrutinize the colonial issues to be faced by the Australian aboriginal people in futuristic Australia. Various issues have been dealt with in the novels like climatic degradation, the stolen generation, slavery system, cultural degradation and so on and these fictions emphasized a note that even after hundred years, the settlers might take away the rights and privileges of the indigenous people in one or the other way which is why the in *The Swan Book*, the climatic degradation and lake pollution are dealt explicitly. Meanwhile, in *Terra Nullius*, the antagonist's name is Devil which is itself a right away indication of the cruelty and the character of the Nun sister Bagra is characterized in such a way that she treated the native children as slaves, and they are brought up to be the slaves for the settlers. These novels are highly transformative in the depiction that these novels exemplified the other major issues of the natives apart from past horrendous events that happened in Australia with bloodshed and violence. These novels could give us various assumptions if we could view it through a psychoanalytic lens.

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