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Postcolonialism in William Faulkner and Juan Rulfo

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Abstract

Although William Faulkner and Juan Rulfo are authors from very different literary traditions, American literature and Latin-American literature, respectively, their works have many similarities thematically and stylistically. Faulkner's Go Down, Moses and Rulfo's Pedro Páramo both feature a circular view of time and reflect the impact that wealthy landowners have on everything around them. These similarities can be explained when looking at both novels in terms of postcolonial theory, which examines the effects of colonizers on a group of colonized people. Go Down, Moses discusses postcolonial issues surrounding race and nature which stem from the colonization of the Native Americans by Europeans, the results of slavery, and the defeat of the South during the Civil War. Pedro Páramo features postcolonial aspects of machismo, race, gender, and religion which resulted from the colonization of the native people of Mexico by the Spaniards. Faulkner and Rulfo developed novels influenced by the legacy of colonialism which helped to shape the literature which followed them.

Key Terms:

American literature; William Faulkner; Juan Rulfo; Go Down, Moses; Pedro Páramo; Latin American literature; Postcolonial theory

Overview of the Authors and their Respective Novels

Although they come from two distinctly different literary traditions, William Faulkner's Go Down, Moses and Juan Rulfo's Pedro Páramo bear many startling similarities to one another both stylistically and thematically. Both novels employ a view of time as circular, where events in the past, present, and future are not described in chronological order; events seem to be described somewhat randomly which can be confusing to the reader. Helen Oakley summarizes James Irby's ideas on the relationship between Faulkner and Rulfo: "The similarities between the writers reside in their experimentation with new methods of narration and the challenging of a sense of linear time" (156). In Go Down, Moses, this non-traditional view of time is apparent through the multiple individually titled sections which each tell their own story but not one continuous, chronological tale, just as in Pedro Páramo the sections of the book jump back and forth between time and place. While the stories in the two novels may not flow in a linear fashion, the order in which events are placed often leads to a greater understanding of the story; for example, a flashback to the past can illuminate present action.

Another similar aspect of the two novels is the characters and their relationship to one another. Initially the relationships between the multiple characters are not clear; however, as both novels continue, it becomes apparent that the majority of the characters in Go Down, Moses and Pedro Páramo can be traced to the McCaslin family and the Páramo family, respectively. These are the central families in the two novels, each with an important patriarch. The McCaslins trace their line back to Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, and the Páramos to Pedro. Both of these men are wealthy landowners in positions of power: Carothers is a slaveholder in Mississippi; Pedro owns a ranch near Comala, a city in the Mexican state of Jalisco. Although the two men exist in different times and places, the two, as landowners, greatly influence the world around them through their legacies.

The two novels were published thirteen years apart, yet both challenge previous ideas of what a novel should be through their subject matter and style. In spite of the similarities between the works and the fact that Faulkner's work was written before the publication of Pedro Páramo in 1955, establishing a link between the two authors is somewhat problematic. While Rulfo denied the influence of Faulkner's writing upon his works, biographer Luis Leal quotes an interview between Rulfo and Elena Poniatowska in his book, Juan Rulfo, which suggests that Rulfo was familiar with Faulkner's work even if he denied any influence (14). Rulfo was "annoyed by the claim, in the first thesis written about his book, that Faulkner had influenced him," according to Carmen Boullosa in her article "Dead Souls" (26). However, whether or not Rulfo was influenced by Faulkner, the similarities between these authors are too great to be ignored. It then becomes necessary to establish another connection between these two authors who revolutionized the way literature was written in their respective canons. Faulkner's Go Down, Moses and Rulfo's Pedro Páramo can thus be understood in the context of postcolonial theory.

Definitions of Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory explores the effects colonizers (most often Europeans) had upon the native people of the areas that were being colonized. These effects on the native people took place during the actual process of colonization and after the Europeans had left (Murfin and Ray 356). Colonialism may have taken different forms, yet the basic similarities among the colonies allow colonialism to "be defined as the conquest and control of other people's land and goods;" colonialism left a legacy everywhere it touched through economic, political, social, and cultural means (Loomba 1101). Postcolonial literature is written by authors who have links to a colonized country or area. These writings express changes in value systems, religions, worldviews, and languages which colonialism brought. Colonized nations "produced [their] own body of literature that dealt with the imperial experience or attempted to define a post-imperial sense of national and cultural identity" (Rivkin and Ryan 1072). Postcolonial writers begin to define literature on their own terms when they write for themselves rather than letting the colonizer speak for them. Postcolonial work allows writers to express themselves and the impacts of colonialism.

No two types of colonial or postcolonial experience are exactly alike because of variables in time, location of the colony, and origin of the colonizers; therefore, as Ania Loomba states, "the legacies of colonialism are thus varied and multiple even as they obviously share some

important features” (1108). There are as many types of postcoloniality as there were areas colonized. The term postcolonial can also be applied to instances where there was no direct colonization, but where there is legacy left similar to that of colonialism, such as the case of African-Americans or other minorities in the United States (Murfin and Ray 356). While the situations in Faulkner’s American South and Rulfo’s Mexico are vastly different, the novels are both able to be considered postcolonial because of the historical and cultural contexts of the authors and their works.

Postcolonial Issues in *Go Down, Moses*

On the surface William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* may appear to have little to do with postcoloniality; however, there are many forces at work that allow its admission into this category. The American South was originally inhabited by Native Americans and later colonized by Europeans. Anglo-Saxon traditions often have little in common with the Native American traditions, which is apparent in the differing views of the treatment of nature and ideas of ownership of land. Enslavement of African-Americans also took place in the South before the end of the Civil War. After the Civil War was over and Reconstruction was imposed on Southerners, there was a period of great transition when “Reconstruction policies . . . resulted in the South’s perception of itself not just as defeated but as conquered” (Cohn 150). The days of plantations and slavery were over, but the issue of race did not disappear. *Go Down, Moses* examines these historical and social events and their effects on the people who lived through them. For the purposes of this paper, postcolonial aspects of race and nature in the novel will be examined.

Race

Postcolonial issues surrounding race are a major theme throughout *Go Down, Moses*. Carothers McCaslin, the family head, has left a twisted legacy through his descendants who are both Black and White. Miscegenation is a large part of these familial relations since old Carothers was a wealthy plantation owner and slaveholder who felt entitled to engage in sexual relations with any of his female slaves, even when these relations involved incest. This complex family web leaves some characters struggling to find their place, understand their racial identity, and figure out how they relate to other characters.

In “The Fire and the Hearth,” Lucas, a Black descendant of old Carothers and Zack Edmonds, a White descendant, must learn to navigate the racial lines that both connect and separate them. The two men were childhood friends raised together on the same plantation, but as adults, the situation is different (Faulkner 111). Once grown, both men are aware of their complicated relationship to each other as Lucas says, “I’m a nigger . . . But I’m a man too. I’m more than just a man. The same thing made my pappy made your grandmaw” (47). This explanation of family lineage reveals that Lucas actually is a closer descendant of old Carothers and “man-made,” while Zack is another generation removed from the family head and “woman-made” (54). Had both men been of the same race, Lucas’ status would have put him above Zack’s. However, because Zack is a White and an acknowledged descendant, Zack is to some extent more powerful. Lucas would like to assert his own dominant status and power as a man, but as a Black man, he is denied his birthright.

After Zack's wife dies in childbirth, he has Lucas's wife Molly, who has also just had a child, come to his house to take care of the White child. When Lucas returns to claim his wife from his White kinsman, there is "a family confrontation made more intense by racial divide" (Marius 183). A fight between two family members is complicated because one man is Black and one is White. When Lucas accuses Zack of sleeping with his wife, Zack is torn when he wants to swear he did not, but "the moment that he sets out to swear, he recognizes that he is treating a Black man as his equal. Yet he is willing to do it" (183). Acknowledging a Black man as the equal of a White is something that had previously been unheard of, yet eventually it happens, and the men gradually come to an understanding, albeit a difficult one. Old Carothers' legacy of a multi-racial family will continue to haunt all of his descendants forever. Understanding and navigating relationships between the former conquerors and those conquered is one difficult postcolonial aspect which Faulkner has commented on in "The Fire and the Hearth".

Racial issues also help link the least connected section of Go Down, Moses, "Pantaloon in Black," to the novel as a whole. "Pantaloon in Black" can stand out or appear separate from the rest of Go Down, Moses because unlike the other sections of the novel, it is not actually about McCaslin family members. Instead, "Pantaloon in Black" tells the story of a Black man, Rider, who is unrelated to the McCaslins except for living on their property, in the aftermath of his wife's death. Even with this distinction, "Pantaloon in Black" remains "an essential part of Faulkner's meditations on race" in the novel (Marius 178). The section is divided into two parts; the first discusses Rider's actions after his wife's death. In his grief, Rider winds up killing a White man and is then lynched for his crime. The first part details Rider's feelings, what he is going through, and the motivation behind his actions. Yet in the second part, the story is viewed from a different perspective, that of the White sheriff and the sheriff's wife. The story the sheriff tells his wife of the Black man's life and death reveals that the sheriff has misunderstood Rider's actions and does not care about Rider as a person. He sees Rider only as one of "them damn niggers . . . they ain't human" (Faulkner 149). When the sheriff asks his wife what she thinks, her reply does not address what her husband has told her; instead the sheriff's wife changes the subject and tells her husband to eat before she leaves (154). The wife is completely uninterested in the story of the lynched Black man, for she does not even feel the need to comment on Rider's story.

Faulkner uses the two sections of "Pantaloon in Black" to show differing perspectives of the same story. The first section reveals the truth of a situation, the actual human experience of a distraught Black man and his choices. The second section demonstrates how situations are often misunderstood by Whites; they see only what they want to see. Rider's struggle is totally insignificant, discounted, and not even considered by the sheriff who only sees that a White man was murdered. Since Whites are the ones in charge, their side of the story will be the version documented, leaving Rider to exist only as a statistic concerning lynchings in history. This is why Rider's perspective is so important in the first section. Rider's story serves to reveal the true, human aspect behind what will soon be glossed over by the White man's telling of it.

Nature

The treatment of nature at the hands of two dramatically different cultures, the Native Americans and Anglo-Saxons is another major postcolonial theme throughout Go Down, Moses.

In the novel, the forest plays a major role as the location for many of the parts of the book, “The Old People,” “The Bear,” and “Delta Autumn” among them. The forest is, in a sense, a character of its own with its own unique history. Originally the land of the Chickasaw, it was sold to Carothers McCaslin by Ikkemotubbe, a Chickasaw chief, and is passed down in the family eventually to Isaac McCaslin, “Uncle Ike,” Carothers’s grandson. Ike, however, has been a student of Sam Fathers, a man of Chickasaw and Black slave descent, who is very much in harmony with nature. From Sam’s teachings, Ike decides to give up his claim to the land, or rather realizes he never had any claim to the land at all when he says:

I can’t repudiate it. It was never mine to repudiate. It was never Father’s or Uncle Buddy’s to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never Grandfather’s to bequeath them to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never old Ikkemotubbe’s to sell to Grandfather for bequeathment and repudiation. Because it was never Ikkemotubbe’s fathers’ fathers’ to bequeath Ikkemotubbe to sell to Grandfather or any man (246).

Ike has learned the Native American way of viewing nature: land cannot belong to anyone, for the land is of itself and not of any human. He cannot give up the land because it was never his and never anyone’s, not even the Native Americans’ who were there before the Whites arrived. Nature is free and cannot belong to anyone.

The land then passes to Ike’s older cousin, McCaslin “Cass” Edmonds, whose views on the ownership of land differ dramatically from those of Ike. Cass, representing the American viewpoint of land ownership, believes in the possibility of men owning land. According to Cass, “nevertheless and notwithstanding old Carothers did own it” and was able to pass the land down through the McCaslin generations (247). Although the Native Americans lived on the land first with their own ideas about nature, the land was bought and taken over by the colonizers, who imposed their own belief systems and ways of life. By examining this postcolonial struggle of ideals, Faulkner provides the reader with a sense of how the world has changed as it passes through time and through the hands of different people. While the Native Americans had a harmonious relationship with the land that Ike seeks to attain, the Whites see the land as something “other” which they must “conquer, control, and dominate,” similar to the relationship between a master and a slave (Frisch 67). The Whites are now in control with nature faring accordingly.

Throughout the novel, nature “is steadily receding, steadily being destroyed, the habitat of the wild things helpless” at the hands of humans (Marius 185). The killing of Old Ben, the bear that had been pursued by the hunting company of men that Cass and Ike were a part of for years, signals the conquest of nature at the hands of man which is not necessarily a positive occurrence. When nature is altered, returning to the past is difficult, perhaps impossible, although the decisions of the past will continue to haunt the present in the reduced natural world.

As Ike ages, he observes these changes through the hunts he goes on every autumn. When he was younger, there was plenty of game to shoot and there were no restrictions on hunting, but when he is an old man, hunters are no longer supposed to shoot does so that the decreased population of deer can repopulate after the hunting. The amount of animals in the

wilderness has decreased with the passage of time as the forests themselves have been depleted, “the territory in which game still existed drawing yearly inward” (Faulkner 320). Once nature is conquered, it cannot go back to the way things had previously been; similarly, once the Natives were conquered by White men, the ideals of the White men became the way of life.

Postcolonial Issues in *Pedro Páramo*

The Mexico of Juan Rulfo was also affected by colonialism as the areas inhabited by the natives were taken over by Spaniards. The Spanish conquerors brought with them values of machismo (exaggerated manliness) and enclosed the land just as Anglo-Saxon colonists had in the United States. A racial hierarchy developed in Mexico among the Spaniards, mixed race peoples, and the native Indians. Catholicism is another notable relic brought with the Spaniards to Mexico. Through the 1800 and 1900s, revolts took place, most notably the Mexican Revolution in 1910 and the Cristero Revolt in 1926 (“Juan Rulfo” 2622). This unstable political structure functions similarly in *Pedro Páramo* as the changes in the American South did in *Go Down, Moses*.

Pedro, who inherits the Media Luna ranch from his father, is a cacique or “political boss” who exploits everything around him (Boullosa 25). Pedro can be understood as “a local microcosm of a Latin American dictator” who greedily takes over the land and oppresses the Indians around him (“Juan Rulfo” 2623). Rulfo details “the oppression of the Indians by rich landowners and the devastation of the countryside” at the hands of one man which is reflective of the power of dictators (2623). In the novel, everything is somehow connected to Pedro, and his influence is felt everywhere. Pedro and the Páramo family represent the colonial powers that have overtaken Mexico and forever altered it. The present condition of the world described in *Pedro Páramo* will always be affected by the past actions of the Páramo family. As nature and race were examined in Faulkner, postcolonial aspects of Rulfo’s novel surrounding human issues of machismo, race, gender, and religion, as well issues to do with nature will be examined by looking at Pedro’s role as the wealthy plantation owner.

Machismo

The number of sexual relationships resulting in illegitimate children reflects the concept of machismo important to Pedro as he is depicted “as a sexual parasite” (Oakley 176). Pedro takes whatever women he can get in order to satisfy his desires, whether sexual or in order to help him in his quest for more power. He marries Dolores Preciado not for love but because his family owes hers a great deal of money and the marriage allows for a cancellation of debts. (He will later send her away as further proof that he does not actually care for her). After the marriage Pedro continues to sleep with other women, and even as he is an old man, Pedro continues his sexual exploits. This hyper-masculinity contributes to the power he holds over the town. The more women Pedro sleeps with and the more children he has, the greater is his power over the town and over its inhabitants, especially the male members of the families of the women with whom he sleeps. The men will learn Pedro has the first claim to the land around him and over all the women who live there. Miguel, Pedro’s son, also continues this legacy of the “patriarchal rancher culture and the repression of women” until he is killed while on the way to visit a lover (Boullosa 26). Rulfo’s portrayal of Pedro brings attention the role that dictators play and the amount of power they assume for themselves over their subjects.

Race and Gender

Issues of race and gender are related to the machismo which influences Pedro and Miguel's sexual appetites. As part of the Spanish ruling class, the Páramos are at the top of the racial hierarchy created when the land was colonized by the Spaniards. The Indian women who are sexually exploited by the Páramo family are at the bottom as they are marginalized by both race and gender. Fulgor Sedano, Pedro's right hand man, is responsible for quieting the women that Miguel has raped. In addition to giving money, he tells the girls, "You should be thankful . . . that you'll be having a fair-skinned baby" which evidences the importance of race and skin color in their world (Rulfo 104). Lighter is better since it indicates the Spanish European blood, while darker skin is reminiscent of native Indian blood. Ironically, having light-skinned children should be a comfort to the women because their children will be able to occupy a higher level of social status.

Religion

Religion is not spared Pedro's evil influence either. Corruption has come to the Catholic Church in Comala because Father Rentería has continuously accepted money from Pedro and done Pedro's will. Father Rentería is aware of the extent of Pedro's relationships through the many confessions he hears of the townspeople, but he has done nothing. Although he feels guilty for what he has done over the years, Father Rentería is denied absolution from a neighboring priest who tells him, "The man whose name you do not want to mention has destroyed your church, and you have allowed him to do it" (Rulfo 71). That the priest is complicit in Pedro's actions indicates that perhaps at times the larger Catholic Church has been complicit in the oppression of dictators. Rulfo may be commenting that just as Father Rentería is denied absolution, the corrupt Catholic Church should not be granted absolution either for the role it has played oppressing its subjects.

Nature

Pedro's power extends even over to the land around him. In the beginning of the novel when Dolores Preciado tells her son, Juan, to return to Comala to claim what is theirs from Pedro, she tells him of "a beautiful view of a green plain tinged with the yellow of ripe corn" which he should see; however, the situation has changed between the time Dolores left Comala and when Juan returns to it (Rulfo 4). Angry that nobody grieved for his dead wife, Pedro decides to get revenge on the town and its inhabitants by not working the land. By the time Pedro himself dies, the land is "ruined, sterile," and hot. The town is empty, inhabited only by ghosts reflecting Pedro's pledge to destroy the town (123). By allowing Pedro's influence to extend over the natural world, where nature "becomes an extension of human consciousness," Rulfo comments on the extreme power of the dictator (Frisch 80). Nothing is left untouched in the path of Pedro, the local cacique, not even the natural world, which means there is nothing that a dictator's power cannot touch.

Conclusion

Besides affecting the novels thematically, the historical and cultural changes in the American South and in Mexico resulted in new ways of looking at fiction and narrative. It is significant that both societies were dealing with such dramatic upheavals, for "times of historical

tension—of breaks between past and present, of transition and revolution—have often been implicated in the emergence of literary movements” (Cohn 157). The same issues that Faulkner and Rulfo discuss in their novels affected the types of writing that they produced. As previously discussed, both writers employed new techniques such as a circular view of time in which the past exists within the present. Go Down, Moses and Pedro Páramo helped to usher in new literary movements, modernism for American and magical realism for Latin American literature, respectively.

Throughout this paper, stylistic and thematic similarities between William Faulkner’s Go Down, Moses and Juan Rulfo’s Pedro Páramo have been examined. Although the two novels come from literary traditions in two different countries, when examined through the lens of postcoloniality, the commonalities in the two novels make sense. Faulkner and Rulfo grew up in dynamic societies, the American South and postcolonial Mexico, in which they witnessed cultural and social changes that would permanently alter the ways of life of their inhabitants. Both authors used the changes they observed as material for their writings and as influences for the type of writing they produced. The literary world is indebted to the historical and cultural changes that inspired the topics as well as the techniques used in the two novels. Literature would not have continued to evolve as it has without such rich works as Go Down, Moses and Pedro Páramo.

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