



Examination of Magical Negro Trope in Sue Monk Kidd's 'The Secret Life of Bees'



Amara Khan

Associate Professor, Department of English, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Abstract: *In a few years, the conversation about Negros has taken a new turn. The Ideal black characters portrayed in the film are often those who suffer from infinite pain and face humiliation to protect white people. These ideal black characters are portrayed by white writers mostly. In this study, we will explore the elements of post-colonialism and how black characters are portrayed by white writers in their books. This study focuses on the Examination of Magical Negro Trope in Sue Monk Kidd's 'The Secret Life of Bees'. This study will focus on how black women are portrayed in the book 'The Secret Life of Bees. In the present, we will explore different black characters who are independent as well as self-sufficient. August Boatwright's character can be seen as strongly independent and compassionate, it breaks the stereotypical expectations of society of black women.*

Key Words: Magical Negro Trope, Post Colonialism, Black Characters, Black Women

Corresponding Author: Amara Khan (Associate Professor, Department of English, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: Amara.khan@lcwu.edu.pk)

Introduction

The term 'Magical Negro' can be traced back to 1940 in Disney's old song named 'Song of South'. The concept of a Magical negro is a black character helping and assisting a white protagonist in thick and thin. The black character is seen as always helping the white character and sometimes gets hurt. The black characters in many books and movies are also portrayed as poor or underprivileged while white characters are portrayed as rich and beautiful. The magical negro is considered a Magical Negro because a black character is shown to possess supernatural powers and abilities. This term has also come from some Spanish 'Comdias de negro' and their description of black fighters in the 16th century. This character

has no aims or goals and exists solely to aid the white character, offering him the solution to the problems. The term "Magical Negro" was also used by Spike Lee, who ridiculed the portrayal of black characters in movies and books. Their background and personal aims are usually not told. These black characters are merely considered tools for helping whites in achieving goals. These characters are always taken for granted while working for white people. They are expected to be naive and submissive. The Secret Life of Bees" is a novel written by Sue Monk Kidd in 2001. The story is set in South Carolina and talks about the journey of a motherless white girl named Lily, Lily lives with her abusive father and her nanny named Rosaleen. Later in the novel Lily escaped to



South Carolina along with Rosalean and took refuge with Boatwright sisters. This novel portrays the journey of Lily and her prejudice against blacks. The absence of a mother in Lily's Life and the quest for a motherly figure is the major theme of this novel. The postcolonial perspective on, "The Secret Life of Bees" is seen from the depiction of negro characters and their terms with the white protagonist. The novel critically examines the social structures that originated in colonial times. The Boatwright sisters, especially August, are the symbol of strength against old norms that label them as inferior beings. e. This novel explores themes of racism and identity crisis, and it features many Black characters who impact the life of the protagonist life. The black sisters are portrayed as symbols of independence and strength against difficult times. This novel critically negates the historical menace against blacks. It also negates racial discrimination. Many novels portray the traditional roles of black people as servile and submissive. They are always shown as morally corrupt and violent. They were always depicted as inferior and uncivilized, while whites were always shown as respectful and rich. In most of the novels, the "Magical Negro" trope when examined through a postcolonial lens then we can see the depiction of blacks as submissive, naive, and inferior to whites. The post-colonial literature mostly challenges the traditional description of Blacks and portrays them as Equal humans like whites. Many Colonizers considered the whites to be superior and wanted to exploit non-whites. The theory of Darwin proposes that people belonging to the superior race will dominate the ones belonging to the inferior race. It was believed that Europeans civilized the non-Europeans as they were more educated and civilized. The Labor class of non-Europeans was born to be exploited by Europeans and whites. The colonies were also a source of

minerals food and textile for the mother country. The Europeans considered it their mission to educate and civilize the non-Europeans. Western society always considered non-Western people to be uncivilized and naive. This novel glorifies the struggle of black women and portrays them to be symbols of resilience and power. This novel breaks the concept of white supremacy. The close relationship and love between the whites and blacks present in the Novel depicts that they both are equal. The portrayal of August as an empowered and unmarried business owner negates the traditional concept of poor African women constantly giving birth.

Problem Statement

A magical negro trope is a character that is portrayed in novels as a black person who saves the life of a white protagonist and enables him to fight with an identity crisis. A black character is considered a magical negro trope as it is stereotypically portrayed as the one who possesses spiritual and mystical powers to fight against all hurdles. A black character portrayed in the novel is expected to be aimless and protect the white protagonist by being selfless and strong. The Magical Negro Trope character is the one who serves the white protagonist directly or indirectly. The effect of colonialism has made the masses criticize the ongoing racism, injustice, and inequality among the masses. Post-colonial literature aims to provide equal human rights and critically examines societal discrepancies. Colonialism has portrayed marginalized communities as naive and uncivilized. The major aim of post-colonial theory is to critically examine the adverse impacts of colonialism and the superiority of whites. The impacts of slavery in the colonial era and its effects on present society are ridiculed by post-colonial writers. Colonial administration often imposes their own rules and regulations while oppressing the colonized people. The present study aims to

analyses the Magical Negro trope traits and characteristics in "The Secret Life of Bees". By highlighting the elements of post-colonialism this study will analyse the character of Magical Negro Trope.

Research Objectives

1. The elements of post-colonialism in the novel 'The Secret Life of Bees'
2. To Analyze the Magical Negro character in the novel 'The Secret Life of Bees'.
3. To Analyze the elements of racial discrimination and differences in the novel.

Research Questions

1. What are the elements of Post colonialism in the novel 'The Secret Life of Bees'?
2. How the character of Magical Negro Trope can be analyzed in the novel 'The Secret Life of Bees'?
3. How the elements of racial discrimination and differences in the novel can be analyzed?

Significance of Study

The Present study highlights the elements of post-colonialism and analysis of Magic Negro trope in the Novel 'The Secret Life of Bees'. It highlights the themes of racism and white superiority among the people of South Carolina. This study aims at the untraditional portrayal of Black women while pointing out some traditional elements too. This study will further help people to study unconventionally post-colonial literature as it portrays the unique elements of the amalgamation of blacks and whites. It will further help people with the issues of racial discrimination and biases. This study focuses on the point that the importance of blacks is the same as the importance of white characters.

Delimitations

The present study will focus on the character of Magical Negro Trope August outright and how she aided the protagonist Lily in achieving her goals. This research will be limited to the analysis of themes of post-colonial literature and themes of racial differences among the masses.

Literature Review

Magical Negro trope is a literary term used in various books, movies, and academic structures. This trope typically features Black characters who have supernatural healing powers and wisdom to help white protagonists overcome their troubles and achieve personal development. This literature review examines the history and implications of the Magical Negro trope and post-colonialism. People say that the trope affects the Black experience pathetically, reducing Black characters to figures whose sole purpose is to serve whites. These black figures are aimless and purposeless and only aim to serve the white protagonist (Nama, [2008](#)). The black character is considered to be a vehicle that helps the protagonist in achieving his goals and realizing his mistakes. trope focuses on racial hierarchies by putting Black characters down as subordinate to whites. These tropes are devoid of self-love and they sacrifice their selves for the white protagonist. (Coleman, [2011](#))

Achebe states in "Things Fall apart," that there are many destructive consequences of colonialism he pays the importance of voices in telling their own stories.

Negro Characters don't have any goals, agency, or personal development. Their story doesn't contain any weight they are there to assist the white characters, depicting a narrative that Black lives are not important (Hughey, [2009](#)).

Scholars want Black characters to be depicted with deepness and detail, ensuring

that the lives of blacks are independent of the whites (hook, 2000)

The trope can be seen as a token, where the portrayal of a Black character is to form an illusion of a white character.

The post-colonial literature focuses on forming stories where Black characters are important to the narrative and not only serve whites. (Jordan, 2007)

Edward Said's seminal work, "Orientalism" (1978), is foundational to postcolonial studies. Said that the word "Orient" created a miserable picture of Eastern society, depicting that the Western people are superior and justifying white people's domination. Orientalism describes the East as exotic and backward.

Ngugi writes in his theoretical work that proper language should be used to advocate for the decolonization of African colonies and literature. (Ngugi.1986)

Rey Chow, written in his book "Writing Diaspora" (1993), extends Said's critique by exploring how Orientalism occurs within different global contexts she highlights the importance of cultural identity and focuses on breaking the stereotypes formed by colonized people.

The intermixing of cultures and the formation of dual identities is a common theme in many books. This hybridity shows the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and prevents the colonized people from voicing their opinions.

Jean Rhys's 1966, novel named as "Wide Sargasso Sea" sheds light on minorities it explores the cultural identity, racism, and effects of colonization. Most of the post-colonial literature focuses on themes of displacement and identity crisis. The quest for Identity is a real issue for marginalized characters in post-colonial literature.

The major themes of Post-colonial literature revolve around preserving the old

customs of colonized communities and revitalizing the older traditions. The traumas faced by colonized people and their quest for identity are one of the major themes of many Post-colonial novels.

Morrison's novels address the effect of slavery on the black community. Her work focuses on the need to raise black voices for the protection of the rights of black communities.

Kimberle Crenshaw in most of her works includes the amalgamation of colonizers and colonized people and the reinvention of a new culture as a result of hybridity that is based on the oppression of one community while other communities are being oppressed.

Research Methodology

Theoretical Framework

The researcher has applied the theory of post-colonialism and analyzed the character of the magical negro trope in the novel "The Secret Lives of Bees". The "Magical Negro" trope is a black character in English literature and movie that has origin in racial discrimination and colonialism. This character possesses supernatural and mystic powers to heal the primary white character (Morrison, 1992). The history of this term traces back to colonialism and how colonizers looked down upon the colonized. The portrayal of black characters as a static character shows how colonizers and white people expect blacks to be naive and submissive in real life too.

The previous portrayal of African Americans in American culture was formed by different producers who depicted them as naive, simple, and uneducated. These characters were often considered a laughingstock, and they reinforced racial discrimination and negated equality.

Many of the Black characters were given the roles of servants in television series and these characters were

given secondary importance. In American TV shows black characters were always given subservient roles and they aided the white protagonist in achieving his goals.

The civil rights movement had changed the situation in America but still, the magical negro trope persists to aid the white protagonist.

Post colonialism literature and theory deal with the elements of identity crisis, the superiority of whites, inequality, and injustice among blacks. The new world stands as proof of the creativity of black people (Saids, 1978) post-colonialism focuses on the point that whites and blacks are equal and are equally civilized and intelligent. The discrimination caused by colonization is baseless and false. Post colonialism focuses on the rights of marginalized communities especially poor women and men. It also focuses on the rights of minorities and laborers. (Bhabha, 1994). It also focuses on the struggles of African American women during migration and poverty. Post-colonial theory glorifies the success of African Americans in the modern world. It also advocates for equal rights for African Americans in the present-day era. Postcolonial theory also deals with civil war and its after-effects on the people of Nigeria. The researcher will study the elements of Post colonialism in the novel 'The Secret Lives of Bees.

Research Design

The research is qualitative as the data is in the form of text and the data is analyzed by applying the theory of post-colonialism and analysis of Magic Negro Trope in the novel 'The Secret Lives of Bees.

Research Method

This research method is qualitative since the researcher will be doing a magic negro trope analysis by applying the theory of post-

colonialism.

Analysis of Magical Black Negro Trope Character August and themes of Post Colonialism from the Content

This section deals with an analysis of the character of Magical Negro Trope in 'The Secret Life of Bees' in the light of post-colonial theory. The post-colonial theory deals with the elements of colonization that have adversely affected the lives of blacks. It discusses the themes of segregation and oppression of minorities. The magical negro Trope is a typical black character that is stagnant and doesn't possess any agenda of its own. The suppression of blacks and lack of character analysis of blacks in movies can be traced back to the colonial era when they were dehumanized and beaten up.

The whites considered blacks to be inferior and lesser human beings. Whites consider themselves to be rich and civilized. Despite advancements in the present era blacks are looked down upon by whites and they have to face prejudice everywhere.

American screenwriters and American scriptwriters mostly portray the characters of blacks as subservient slaves or wise people who have suffered a lot due to their troubles and become mystic. The magical negro trope often includes a black character who has suffered a lot in his or her life and later became a very wise person because of his sufferings, he offers advice to the white character that helps him in personality development. In many Netflix series, it is shown how orphan girls are taken care of by their black nannies and play the role of maternal figures in their lives. The novel Secret Lives of Bees depicts how the writer dehumanizes and desexualizes the black women Rosaleen and August. They both were called 'Mammy' although they were different from the stereotypical 'mammy'. Roselean was a full-time worker and caregiver at Lily's house while August

was an empowered female who owned a business of honey.

Roselean was paid for her services and she took care of Lily but she possessed her own desires too. Unfortunately, she was kicked out of her house by her husband. August was a motherly figure for her sisters too. She helped her emotionally unbalanced sisters and later helped Lily too.

She was an active feminist who took part in different movements like worshipping the black Madonna and bringing women close to the religion. August owned a huge amount of property in the town and she was respected for her position all over the town. The description of the Black Madonna and the word black for a divine God shows humiliation on the part of God but later a white girl worshipping it turned the whole concept upside down. The concept of motherly love taught to Lily by August was unique, she taught that motherly love was present everywhere in the world and it was the love of Virgil Marry, this love proved to be the reason for the re-growth of Lily.

Lily was born in the South and she was forced to believe that blacks are less intelligent and civilized because in the South blacks possessed separate hospital rooms, they were not given the right to vote, they had very few rights and

The novel also portrays how, when Lily felt attracted to Zach, she questioned her whole belief system and was shocked. She expected Zach to be naive and ugly but instead he was charming and attractive, Zach was imprisoned but he continued to be more strongly willed and resilient, he was athletic and possessed a magnetic personality. Lily expected black men to be naive and aimless, she was shocked to see a black man so charming and goal-driven.

The wisdom of all black characters and their extraordinary skills made the concept of

racism a foolish thought. In the novel 'The Secret Life of Bees' blacks are wiser and more empowered while the protagonist Lily and other characters are shown as naive,

Hold on now, Franklin," said Mr. Gaston, moving us toward the door. "Now's not the time." (Kidd, 2002, p. 51).

Gaston who was a police officer arrested Lily and Roselean when they fought with racist white men. He told Franklin that it; was not the time when he could behave aggressively. Mr. Gaston exhibits reverse racism and rebukes Franklin,

Brother Gerald dragged his teeth back and forth across his lip. I could tell he was weighing what I said.

"The brother Gerald drags his teeth back and forward in anger then Lily confronts him and gives justification that Roselean did everything for the love of God' (Kidd, 2002, p. 69). Gerald was naive and possessed a poor understanding of religion. This also shows that blacks were nearer to God as compared to whites. This kind of racism was very common in South Carolina.

That's what it means, but you going to have to drag people kicking and screaming to do it.

Rosaleen told Lily that even though the civil rights movement was prevalent in the country, still, no one paid heed to the rights of blacks. It is because people consider blacks to be naive and they don't change their belief. Lily wanted to rent a room for Roselean and herself but Roselean stopped her because she knew that no one was going to lend a room to her as she was black. This kind of discrimination occurring in the South shaped Lily's belief in racial discrimination so strongly that she also thought that blacks were less educated and civilized. The discrimination towards different minorities as a result of colonization has caused many people to consider blacks as inferior beings. Due to colonization the Negroes were

considered to have no voice and were considered as lower class. They were expected to do low-paid jobs that required a lot of hard work and Labor. August and Roselean were major characters of the novel who were marginalized and considered as inferior. The death of April due to humiliation faced by blacks and the tragic end of Zack depict that blacks were not considered humans. Although they are different from stereotypical descriptions of black women in post-colonial literature. The symbol of the bee and bee hive is used in the novel that show harmony, equality, and motherhood. It shows how our Wright sisters are surrounded by troubles but still, they work in harmony and peace. The bees and bee hive show how women of different races can live together. At the start of the novel, Lily is forced to view Blacks as inferior beings while at the end of the novel, she realizes that all people are equal.

“There was no difference between my piss and June’s (Kidd, 2002, p. 88). That’s what I thought when I looked at the dark circle on the ground. Piss was piss.

Lily faced racism in the house of August’s sisters, and she was really shocked to see it. She has never been discriminated but it was the first time that she was looked down upon. Later she realized that she and June have the same body and physical structure so why she was discriminated against and considered inferior? This was an epiphany for Lily and she changed her views instantly.

You have to find a mother inside yourself. We all do.

The whole novel revolves around August and Lily, and how August tries to be a surrogate mother for Lily. August told Lily the worth of Self-love and how she can love herself when no one is there to love or support her.

The transformation and maturation of Lily were never possible without August. August

was a black character and a motherly figure both for Lily as well as her sisters May and June. She supported her both sisters in the period of emotional turmoil but also played the role of their mother. Lily was a poor motherless child who wanted to be loved but unfortunately, there was no one to support her and love until she met the woman August who not only transformed her but also loved her unconditionally. She told Lily that Virgil Marry is the mother to all people and she loves all people unconditionally. The magical Negro trope character is August as she helped Lily in transformation and maturation. Lily discovered the truth about her mother through August and later she forgave herself for the fact that she had killed her mother accidentally. The Magic Negro Trope character August was resilient, brave, and wise. She healed the immature Lily who later transformed into an independent woman. August’s character was portrayed as a mystic who healed Lily and supported her. She proved to be a mother to Lily and changed her beliefs too. The troubles faced by August made her stronger and she decided to change the lives of many women by teaching them about religion. Instead of marrying and producing children she focused on a greater cause of spreading knowledge and supporting her younger sisters. She was respected for her hard work and knowledge. August supported Lily to be brave like her and love herself even if no one was there to support her. August proved to be a true magical negro trope as she helped Lily to realize the truth and achieve her goals. The respectful description of blacks made the concept of magical negro trope unique in this novel.

Lily, you can talk to me. You know that, right?

August gave confidence to Lily that she could talk to her about any topic she wanted to, Lily thought that June didn’t like her so she was about to

leave later August told her that August would support her emotionally. August helped Lily to grow in her life and she implanted the seed of self-love in her.

When Lily came to stay at August's house she lied about Roselean and herself just to get a space but August was very wise, despite knowing the fact that Lily was lying she allowed them to stay with them.

Conclusion

The researcher has traced the elements of post-colonialism and analyzed the elements of Magical Negro trope in the novel 'The Secret Life of Bees'. The researcher has analyzed how a magical negro trope character August saved a white character Lily from emotional turmoil and loneliness. The elements of post-colonialism and racism are portrayed in this research. The racial difference and segregation have caused deaths and turmoil in the novel. The resilience of Black characters and the glorification of their hard work.

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