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# AN ABORIGINAL REWRITING OF THE COLONIAL ENCOUNTER IN MUDROOROO NAROGIN'S DOCTOR WOOREDDY'S PRESCRIPTION FOR ENDURING THE ENDING OF THE WORLD

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**Synopsis:**

Narogin's novel is worthy of note because it is a postcolonial writing back to the tradition of white Australian literature. The novel foregrounds the hitherto silenced voice of native Australians, debunking all the paternalistic concepts of civilizing mission and common humanity. From a reversed point of view, European settlers are put under the scrutiny of the Aborigines to become the object of sardonic rewriting. It is white Europeans, not the Aborigines, who are truly barbarian and alien.

An Aboriginal Rewriting of the Colonial Encounter in Mudrooroo Narogin's  
*Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*

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The age of colonialism is over. The age we are living now is labelled as post-colonial. But this schematized and widely accepted periodization is valid when we define colonialism in terms merely of territorial conquest and material exploitation. History tells us that colonialism involved not simply a domination of physical space on the periphery of European civilization but a subjugation of the mind by the transplantation of European values, norms, and institutions. These discursive practices of colonialism are still under way in the post-colonial age. The cultural legacies of colonialism have been so permeating that even postcolonial writings to resist them are susceptible to the Eurocentric mode of thought. According to Abdul R. JanMohamed, the ongoing influence of colonial discourse is a distinctive mode of neocolonialism, which he calls the 'hegemonic' phase of colonialism as distinct from its preceding 'dominant' phase in the age of formal empires(80-82).

The colonial/post-colonial demarcation is more problematic when applied to the so-called Fourth World. For all the proliferation of postcolonial discourses, there still exist on the globe a multitude of peoples who live in the age of colonialism in a literal sense. For them, colonial domination is not a shared history of the past but an existing condition of the present. Aboriginal peoples in Australia are a striking example. Unlike most of African and Asian countries, Australia has become the land of the once visitors, a land where the colonized natives not merely have suffered but are still suffering from colonialism. The situation of Aborigines is analogous to that of American Indians. Having been dispossessed of their land and political sovereignty, they live as exiles in their own land. To borrow from Frantz Fanon's phrase, the tragedy of Aborigines is characterized by the Manichean dualism of two races, wherein "the colonizer creates an Odyssey-like epic against the silent and almost inorganic background formed by the colonized"(51). Just as the genocide of American Indians have been veiled in the Christian ritual of Thanksgiving Day, so Aborigines and their culture have been buried in the Anglo-Celtic history of civilizing missions. The terms 'post-colonial' and 'neocolonial' are inadequate to describe the situation of Aboriginal populations. For them, colonialism is not over yet.

It was in reaction to this Aboriginal struggle and plight that Mudrooroo Narogin wrote his third novel, *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*.<sup>1)</sup> Given European settlement and its irreparable

consequences, there is neither returning to the precolonial past nor rebuilding the hegemony of the almost vanished culture; but the way in which the past is seen can be changed. In fact, Aboriginal history and culture was destroyed mainly because, until the recent emergence of Aboriginal literature signalled by the appearance of Narogin's first novel, *Wildcat Falling* in 1965, there was no indigenous writing to stand as counter-discourse. As Kateryna Arthur points out, writing has been the agent of destroying the orality-based Aboriginal culture; but paradoxically writing also can be the only possibility to reconstruct it(59). For Narogin, too, writing is a political choice, a means to put the record straight. In his *Writing from the Fringe* Narogin articulates the purpose of writing novels;

Aboriginal literature begins as a cry from the heart directed at the white man. It is a cry for justice and for a better deal, a cry for understanding and an asking to be understood. In some ways it is different from other national literatures which are directed towards a national readership and only after that to other nations. Black writers, such as Kevin Gilbert and Oodgeroo Noonuccal have a White Australian readership firmly in mind when they write and it is their aim to get across to as many people as possible the Aboriginal predicament in Australia. A predicament which has resulted in many Aborigines becoming strangers in their own land, so alienated that sometimes they seem to have lost the will to survive.(1)

*Doctor Wooreddy* is thus not merely a story about colonial encounter, a story in which the naked natives face the clothed and armed Europeans, but "an attack upon white myths and misconceptions about Aborigines, a conscious rewriting of history from an Aboriginal point of view"(Arthur 58).

If *Doctor Wooreddy* is "a cry for justice and for a better deal" as Narogin says, the novel might be tinged with a 'victimist' impulse with its overtones of resentment and retribution. But Narogin's voice attacking the dominant white myths is rather calm and restrained. Instead of narrating the genocide of the Tasmanian Aborigines with a vindictive bias, he neutralizes his emotionality and tells us the story as if he were a nonchalant spectator. This narrative strategy and its effects are similar to those in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In

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1) The novel was first published in 1983 under Narogin's English name, Colin Johnson.

describing the collapse of the traditional Ibo community caused by the encroachment of European colonialism, the Nigerian writer neither idealizes the precolonial past with a nostalgic eye nor denounces the white settlers with a retaliating blade. He simply makes his readers participate in the reinterpretation of Africa's cultural totality and the whole sequence of colonization, while distancing himself from the narrative situations and avoiding the likely charge of a 'victimist' reaction. Likewise, the seemingly detached stance of Narogin helps him to dissimulate his Aboriginal position and to convince his readers that he is reporting 'historical facts' just as they happened. And yet a striking difference between Achebe and Narogin is the latter's employment of satire. Whereas Achebe completely filters his emotionality through documentary-like realism, Narogin appropriates the conventional literary formality in order to underplay his sarcastic and retributive sentiment. Satire, as literary genre, is a means to convey the satirist's political or moral messages without bringing himself/herself to the textual surface. Satire is thus a perfect tool for Narogin who purports deconstruct the white myths, while pretending that he is an unbiased, dispassionate, and reliable narrator.

Satire in *Doctor Wooreddy* is directed against the notion of white supremacy in general and the self-appointed missionary, George Robinson in particular. The novel begins with a recounting of the mysterious violences and deaths befallen to the Tasmanian community. Narogin here depicts the first colonial encounter by adopting the Aboriginal mythic binarism of land-as-good and sea-as-evil. At first, the Tasmanian Aborigines believe that the misfortunes were brought by the curse of "Ria Warrawah," an evil deity manifesting itself on the sea. They take the arrival of white convicts as an supernatural act, "unprovoked, but fatal as a spear cast without reason or warning"(10). Colonialism, so to speak, came to them as an omen for the ending of the world. But the future Aboriginal doctor, Wooreddy, gradually learns that the "num," which he thought to be an agent of the malevolent spirit, are human beings with white skin. Wooreddy gains his knowledge from their treatments of Aboriginal women, especially from the rape of Trugernanna. In the initial stage of his education, all the strange acts, tongues, and physical appearance of white people including their "pale, bloodless penis"(22) become the object of the Aboriginal boy's curiosity and scrutiny. From his point of view, whiteness is not a sign of cultural superiority and moral

excellence, but something unnatural and inhuman.

The question on white humanity is followed by an attack on the myth of white supremacy. Although Europeans are in control of technology-based city life, they are totally helpless in surviving the primitive circumstances of the bush:

Robinson shouted at the convicts to set up the tent, to light the fire, to prepare a meal, and the convicts shuffled about without much effect. But the time the ghosts were organizing themselves, the Aborigines had finished eating and were lying back smoking.(67)

For Europeans, the bush is either a place of refuge or an alien setting for libidinal and supernatural manifestations. For Aborigines, contrarily, the bush is the locale for everyday life wherein the Eurocentric distinction between center and fringe, between civilization and barbarism loses its hierarchical implication. The reversal of white superiority and black inferiority is exemplified again in the funny story told by Ummarrah. When Ummarrah and his comrades were out in search of white shelters to destroy them, they found a sleeping white convict under a tree. Gathering around him, they bent down and shout at him. Then the convict was so frightened at the black faces staring down at him that, slowly opening his mouth and pissing himself, he sprang to his feet and flashed out of sight. Narogin's suggestions are that white Europeans, when placed in a different landscape, are inferior as well as vulnerable and that they also can become the object of derision and contempt.

As the novel proceeds, satire gradually narrows its focus on Robinson, the Protector of Aborigines, who assumes that he is a bringer of Light to the land of darkness. Firmly believing that he is devoting his entire life to the salvation of heathens, Robinson justifies his self-appointed mission as an imperative from God. But his evangelical rationalization is so much tempered with self-delusion that the would-be saint appears to us no more than a narcissistic clown:

We are on a mission of God, on a holy mission of salvation and nothing the Evil One shall do will deter me from accomplishing this journey through the wilderness laced with serpents and tendrils of fog.

These poor heathens must be saved and I will save them. I have ordained to do this by God Almighty Himself.(74)

A deeper sense of irony on Robinson's missionary activities derives from the contradiction between his religious theory and his political practice. He is convinced not only that Aborigines are primitive and degenerate as well, and hence, in need of redemption by the Grace of God, but that they ought to be civilized under British law and for British benefit. In his interview with Governor Arthur, Robinson reveals the double purpose of his missionary activities:

We are all Christians and know our duty, Sir! My intentions are first to pacify them, then to civilise and Christianise them into good subjects of Her Majesty(53).

Robinson's phrase illustrates the typical rhetoric of colonial evangelism that equates Christianizing the rest of the world with its Europeanization. It is needless to say that Christianity played a crucial role in the advance of European colonialism. What the well-meant white missionaries brought to the lands of 'superstition' and 'savagery' were not only the Christian faith but also European values, norms, laws, institutions, and modes of production. For the colonized natives, Christian conversion meant the denial of their traditional religions and cultures so that they might become agents of colonial domination. For the colonizing Europeans, by contrast, the monotheistic doctrine that the fallen humanity can be delivered only through God's Grace granted them the self-claimed right to invade, conquer, and exploit the rest of the world. The dissemination of Christianity was a moral alibi to justify the whole process of colonization. In the novel, it is Robinson who discloses such ambivalent function of Christianity in the colonial context. In his overweening and self-delusive pride, Robinson echoes Thompson, the District Officer of colonial Kenya in Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat*. Thinking of himself as "Prospero in Africa," Thompson argues that "the growth of the British Empire was the development of a great moral idea," namely, "the principle of Reason, of Order and of Measure"(53-54). Just as Thompson is convinced of the British liberalism



that peoples of all colours and creeds can be embraced under the Union Jack because they are created equal by God, so his Australian counterpart is blinded by the idea of colonization as an embodiment of Christian philanthropy.

Robinson's real intention manifests itself in his treatment of the Aborigines. Despite his theory of human equality, his relations with the Aborigines are always defined in terms of domination and subordination. Like Prospero and Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Robinson and Wooreddy form a typical colonizer-colonized relation. An important fact is that Robinson is not merely manipulating but dependent upon Wooreddy as go-between and interpreter. More important is that, as Caliban's attempts at discursive resistance are easily overridden by material dispossession and physical enslavement, the conflictual dynamics inherent in Wooreddy's relations with Robinson is suppressed within the unequal power relations until his political awakening at the end of the novel. Shakespeare's recalcitrant but gullible native offers to share the fruits of the island with the shipwrecked intruder but is deprived of his inheritance and schooled in the privileged language to be exploited by the colonizer. Similarly, Narogin's naive and obedient doctor is domesticated in a Christian way only to lose his Aboriginal identity, to be alienated from his community, and eventually to become a good subject of the colonizing forces.

The analogy exists also between Prospero and Robinson. According to Octave Mannoni who interpreted *The Tempest* as psychodrama on the power relations between Prospero and Caliban, the 'authority complex' or 'leadership complex' inherent in the European psyche, yet repressed in the competitive metropole, brings to the surface in the colonial situation. Completely separated from and untrammelled by the various forms of bonding, the white settler on the margins of civilization can have an opportunity to realize the childish dream of the far-away prince(111-121). Shakespeare's Prospero, in fact, was banished from his kingdom because of his total indulgence in "liberal arts" at the expense of his public duty. But in the magic island, he transforms himself into a providential figure acting to re-create the island to his image. Like Shakespeare's exiled magician, Robinson, once a bricklayer of humble origin in London, now wishes to become a Prospero in Australia among what he always calls "these poor heathens"(74).

The colonizer becomes a far-away prince not only because of the relative

absence in 'no man's land' of competition among Europeans but because of 'voluntary enslavement' on the part of the colonized. In his analysis of various colonial encounters, Peter Hulme draws a parallel between Prospero's control of Ariel in *The Tempest* and Crusoe's domestication of Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*. Both Prospero and Crusoe utilize the spontaneous gratitude resulting from the liberation of the captive party; both Ariel and Friday, by removing themselves the danger of insurgency, participate unknowingly in the consolidation of colonial power(202-207). This interplay between the colonial subject and its manipulating power is true of *Doctor Wooreddy*. In a sense, Wooreddy resembles Ariel rather than Caliban. Wooreddy's self-subjugation, his own positioning as a subject with no will to resistance enables Robinson to sustain his privileged position without any need to use force. To use Mannoni's words, Prospero's 'leadership complex' can be fully satisfied only when combined with Caliban's 'dependency complex.'

That Narogin's white missionary is a prototype of the European colonialist becomes evident in the latter half of the novel. Taking off his religious mask, Robinson turns into an egocentric servant of the colonial government. When he is told by Major Abbott to hand over the Aborigines he "collected" during his long expedition around the West Coast, Robinson makes a strong protest against the careless treatment of his "collections." But the major's offer of bounty money (forty five pounds) quickly silences him. The "Fader" accepts the money and has his "children" march off to prison, comforting himself in his warm hotel bed that "a night in the gaol would not hurt his charges and would keep them from wandering off"(129).

Robinson's self-centered motive is more clearly revealed in his argument with his wife who, disgusted with diseases and deaths around her, importunes him to return to London. At first he tries to rationalize his colonial life with the same religious rhetoric as he used on the Aborigines; "this is not just a job to me. It is a work of great merit and of everlasting reward. We are helping these poor souls to become good Christians"(156). But, having found that such florid tongues do not move his wife, he speaks out why he came to Australia:

Because I have not yet been made eligible to receive a pension when I retire from government service, and my assets are insufficient to allow me to live in any degree of comfort. Martha, I have outgrown my

humble origins, and will never return to the bricklaying trade. Martha, I beg of you to have patience. A little longer and I promise you that we will be off the island.(158)

Narogin here devastatingly unmasks the capitalistic motives behind the surface altruism of Robinson and of colonialism as well. By juxtaposing the underlying intention and its surface justification, Narogin incisively satirizes the Janus-like duality of colonialist mentality. The fact that Robinson's metamorphosis from a bricklayer into a missionary was motivated by material needs signifies more than the selfishness of an individual; it is rather a microcosmic illustration of the complex mechanism of colonization. Beneath all the humanitarian theories like the principle of gravitation in the universe or the white man's burden to civilize the world, the economic needs for natural resources and overseas markets are at work as the driving force of colonialism. What Narogin makes us see in his white missionary is the simultaneous parade of two different British troops in the pristine land, each carrying a different signifier, that is, the Holy Rood and the Union Jack. In this parade of colonialism, materialism is closely in line with philanthropy, God in harness with Mammon.

Robinson's conversion from a bricklayer into a missionary was caused by economic needs. So is his reconversion from a missionary into a colonial agent. Engrossed in the government pension, Robinson does not leave for his final destination, London, even after he has completed the service as the Great Conciliator in the Van Diemen's Land. Instead, Robinson makes his way to Hobarton for a better position. In the leave-taking scene, Narogin once again reduces the narcissistic colonist into an object of derision. Dressed in a newly ordered and neatly pressed uniform, the Great Conciliator appears with his little white dog bounding at his feet, and then, pleased to note tears in the eyes of the Aborigines, yet little realizing that they are pinning their last few hopes on him, he enjoys fully his sentimental sense of triumph. He is still proud of being "Fader" while his mind is far away from "his children." The Aborigines was for Robinson valuable property only when they were of immediate relevance to his social advance. Now he need not to veil his mercenary interests in the rhetoric of missionary obligation, for he does not see in "his children" any more utility value. All he is concerned about is his physical security and material gain.

The rest of the novel demonstrates what Robinson has actually brought to the Aborigines. The Aborigines collected, trained, and exploited by Robinson are destroyed one way or another; some are abandoned in isolation camps, and others are killed in white men's shooting games or in military operations for massacre. The faithful servants of Robinson (Wooreddy, Ummarra, Trugernanna, Dray), who are the only Aboriginal survivors of the genocide, come to recognize in the end that their "Fader" is one of the "num" who have brought this calamity on their people. They thus take off their white clothes, and attempt to escape only to be captured again. Robinson visits the cell in which Wooreddy, entirely exhausted, sits with a vacant smile on his face, while the two women plead with Robinson to spare Ummarra who is to be executed for murdering white men. But Robinson is neither a "Conciliator" nor a "Protector":

A man has been killed, or rather, two men have been foully murdered in cold blood. Ummarra has acknowledged his guilt and he will pay the supreme penalty..... And I declare that it is your own fault. What you have done is beyond my comprehension and understanding. It is also beyond my forgiveness and I wash my hands of you.(208)

What Narogin here satirizes is not only Robinson's Pilate-like evading attitude, but his double measure that murdering a white convict who raped Aboriginal women is an unpardonable sin, whereas shooting the Aborigines just for sport is necessary in the process of civilizing the barbarian land. Beneath this colonialist dichotomy lies the assumption that 'we' may and must colonize 'them' because 'they' are not white, because 'they' are barbarians who are ignorant of the Bible, Shakespeare, and Mozart; and that the reverse case is simply inconceivable. This Eurocentric binarism between 'us' and 'them', this superiority complex inherent in white mentality is, according to Fanon, the fundamental contradiction of European humanism. Europeans, says Fanon, "are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience"(311). It is such a double-faced concept of 'human' that Narogin ultimately questions in the novel. For him, the concomitant endorsement by European humanism of

dignifying the 'Man' and dehumanizing the 'men' provided European settlers with a moral sanction to legitimize their 'inhuman' violences on Aboriginal populations.

Against Robinson's absurd statement that denies the Aborigines any notion of 'humanness', Narogin makes Ummarrah enter a bitter protest:

It's no fun living in a white man's world. I leave it without regret.....  
they don't even believe that we can speak like this or choose our own  
destiny. We have chose to go away and we are going. Soon everything  
will end and they will have only ashes.(209)

This defiant cry for free will and choice creates a powerful moment in the novel. Ummarrah's protest is the first Aboriginal challenge to the given social hierarchy. This might be Narogin's own prescription for enduring the ending of the world. Doctor Wooreddy is not a reliable doctor, his prescription being no more than resignation and acquiescence. Like other Aborigines, he is rather a patient whose consciousness has been paralysed by the bad faith of fatalism. Educated and dressed in a white way, using the white language, and sometimes masquerading as a white man, he serves "Meeter Ro-bin-un" as his "Fader." Yet the outcome of his self-alienation and white pigmentation is a painful awareness that he is still a black. Ironically he is abandoned after all by the white system he has worked with and for. For Narogin, this ideological enslavement as well as technological backwardness in the Aborigines has brought to them "the end of the world." His prescription for the Aborigines is that, even though they cannot return to the pre-colonial past or subvert the existing social order, they must not embrace colonialist ideology as unquestionable.

Although the novel is a double-edged satire directed toward Robinson and Wooreddy as well, Narogin's main target is the white missionary. With all his self-righteous profession of Christian philanthropy, Robinson is a harbinger of calamity in the vanguard of European imperialism. His political mission is spelled out in the order from the governor: "to contact the Aborigines living along the west coast and to learn their numbers"(96). Just as the foundation of a church, a school, and a hospital is followed by the occupation of an army and a colonial government in *Things Fall Apart*, so Robinson's missionary expedition in

the name of "the journey of salvation"(66) turns out to be a prelude to colonial invasion. One might say that Robinson, too, is a social victim who has been manoeuvred and exploited by the metropolitan imperial forces. But Narogin does not endorse such a sentimental or humanist reading because it shades the social structure and its ideology behind the individual. As Hulme has suggested, Narogin's Robinson is at once an individual and a national consciousness, the social relations involved being simultaneously personal and international, parabolic and historical as well(216).

This is why Narogin repudiates the literary tradition established by white Australian writers including Patrick White, Randolph Stow, and Robert Drewe.<sup>2)</sup> They also have attempted to bring to light the dark history of their Anglo-Celtic ancestors that has remained in their mind a haunting scarlet letter. The white protagonists they have created are often agonizing religious figures who, obsessed with the white man's guilt and burden, are led to undergo the journey of self-discovery through their involvement in the suffering and plight of the Aborigines. Narogin's white missionary, by contrast, is not given a chance to experience spiritual metamorphosis, or a space for the reader's sympathy. By remaining unaware of what he has done to the end of the novel, he becomes merely an object of tart smile.

*Doctor Wooreddy* is worthy of note in that it is a daring and deliberate writing back to the tradition of white Australian literature. The Aborigines have for two centuries been either excluded from the pages of white history or, at best, included as the silent background for building the national identity of white Australia. But the novel foregrounds the hitherto silenced voice of native Australians, debunking all the sentimental and paternalistic concepts of civilizing mission and common humanity. From a reversed point of view, European settlers are put under the scrutiny of the Aborigines to become the object of sardonic

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2) Patrick White's *Voss*, Randolph Stow's *To the Islands*, and Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows* might be good examples. Especially *The Savage Crows* is a reconstruction of the same historical event, the genocide of the Tasmanian Aborigines. But the presentation of the past purely through Robinson's diary makes him tell his colonial experience from his own standpoint. For instance, his economic establishment before the mission gives him a better justification for the initial motive than Narogin's Robinson. Moreover, his real angry at the multiplicity of white evils and his deep sympathy with the suffering and misery of the Aborigines render in him the image of a true evangelist whose name deserves to be immortalized on history's page.

rewriting. As the idea of "num" as "almost human" suggests, their appearance, acts, and thoughts are questioned and ridiculed by the Aborigines. It is white Europeans, not the Aborigines, who are truly barbarian and alien.

In his *Writing from the Fringe*, Narogin asserts that the primary agenda of his contemporary Aboriginal writers is to give their people a history, an alternative to the dominant white myth masquerading as objective history. The fundamental Aboriginal problem lies in what Kevin Gilbert calls "a rape of the soul"<sup>3)</sup> rather than in material conditions like unemployment, bad housing or ill health. This is why the past is of the utmost importance to Narogin. He continues to say that "this past is still with us. Survivors are still living, and I think that the awfulness of man's inhumanity to man should be dealt with until it becomes accepted as part of official Australian history"(25). Rewriting the past, hence, is the first step to "decolonizing the mind" as Ngũgĩ' and Negritude intellectuals have stressed. Unless Aboriginal people debunk the myth of white supremacy inscribed in Australian history, unless they take off the 'white masks' put on to veil their 'black skin,' Narogin concludes, there would be no rebuilding the legitimate identity of Aboriginality on the ashes of cultural genocide.

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3) Kevin Gilbert's words are quoted in Narogin's *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 2.

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