
Assimilation and Paternalism in No Sugar

Postcolonial literature both reveals and challenges the ideals of a dominant culture in their attempt to marginalise and control a minor group. *No Sugar* is a play set in a period of Australian history known as Protectionism, in which Indigenous Australians were marginalised as primitive beings, incapable of self-dependence and hence protected through forced assimilation. Through the experiences of the Millimurra family, the play effectively exposes the inhumane treatment of Aborigines imposed upon them through the ignorance and prejudice present amongst European Australians and Government policies. The Eurocentric value of assimilation and the paternalistic attitudes of white Australian society at the time are revealed through the way in which characters of the marginalised Aboriginal minority are represented as Other despite their forced attempts to acculturate, as well as the way in which white characters portray them as incompetent through their own condescending treatment of Aborigines.

The value of Assimilation present in white European society at the time the play is set is both revealed and challenged through the way that character Billy Kimberley is marginalised and considered Other by both cultural groups. Throughout the 1930s, assimilation existed as an unofficial policy which expected Indigenous Australians to abandon their own heritage and hence adopt the customs and traditions of the general majority. Such an expectation was highly valued amongst the xenophobic, white Australian public (Red Apple Education Ltd, 2009). This value is exposed within the play by the way in which Aboriginal characters are encouraged to acculturate with the promise of better treatment and improved living conditions. Billy, who has lost nearly all sense of belonging through the loss of his tribe, conforms to a Eurocentric lifestyle in hopes of escaping the oppression that his people face as a result of their cultural differences. His attempt to assimilate benefits him to some extent, for he is rewarded with the possession of a whip, considered as a symbol of white authority. However, the value of assimilation is challenged through Billy's character rather than promoted. Amongst the white Australian society of the play, Billy is crudely represented as a "dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs" (Conrad, 1899, p. 36). Despite taking on a European appearance, he remains marginalised by the very society in which he tries to fit in with and continues to stand out. Such an image is emphasised through the stage directions which describe Billy being "dressed in new but absurdly ill-fitting uniform" (p.96). Billy, who is no longer recognised by his own people, is unable to completely assimilate and hence earns the ridicule of both groups through his futile attempts. Not only does he fail to gain equality in regards to appearance, but he is also unsuccessful in attaining the dignified treatment that the idea of assimilation seemed to incorporate. Instead of directly handing it to Billy, Mr. Neal "throws a stick of tobacco onto the floor" (p. 73) as one would throw a treat to common household pet. By accepting such undignified treatment, Billy loses the respect of his own cultural group, but he has never truly been respected from his assimilated society, either. Assimilation is revealed as a value of white Europeans within the play as it appears to benefit characters like Billy to some extent. However, through the way that he is marginalised and represented as Other by both cultural groups the policy of assimilation comes across as an inane Eurocentric ideology which serves no physical purpose in the romanticised colonial venture to civilise Indigenous Australians.

The paternalistic attitude of the dominant European Australian society at the time is revealed through the way in which the condescending treatment of white characters towards Aborigines

within the play portrays them as incompetent and in need of guidance. Aboriginal Protection boards were set up in the early 1900s to the 1950s, hence introducing a paternalistic approach. A result was the institutionalisation of racism in which white authorities were given the constitutional power to restrict Aborigines' ability to find employment, travel, marry and even consume alcohol. Overall, they were viewed and treated as child-like primitives, almost a part of the land rather than as people with their own culture (Conference of Education Systems Chief Executive Officers, 2000). The parallel stage action utilised within the play serves to both reveal and challenge this attitude of paternalism as it creates a comparison between the paternalistic view and the subsequent lack of action, hence highlighting the hypocrisy present within Eurocentric beliefs. This is demonstrated through Mr. Neville's supercilious letter to Mr. Neal, dictated in the office of the Chief Protector of Aborigines, in Perth, which outlines the lack of cleanliness of Aboriginal people, hence depicting them as incapable of the simple act of sustaining personal hygiene. For instance, Mr. Neville suggests "practical training from yourself and Matron on the correct usage" (p.24) of toilet paper. Such a patronising suggestion depicts Aborigines as incompetent and uncivilised due to their supposed inability to attend to such a menial task. They are evidently marginalised from the rest of society until they can "successfully uncalculated such basic but essential details of civilised living" (p.24). Despite being represented and treated as children who require such basic education, they are not actually given the means to live up to the standard that society expects of them. While this paternalistic attitude is romanticised through the way in which it is illustrated in Mr. Neville's office, it is the parallel stage action taking place in the Northam police station that reveals the ironic reality. It is there that Milly and Gran first learn that soap had been cut from their rations, to which Milly responds "How can I keep my kids clean and sen 'em to school?" (p. 22). Milly is evidently a competent and mature person who is capable of taking care of herself and her family, yet is not provided with the proper means to do so despite the hypocritical expectations of white society. The romanticised Eurocentric attitude of paternalism is revealed by the way in which Aborigines are represented as incapable of self-dependence, illustrated through the parallel stage action utilised within the play.

No Sugar is an example of postcolonial literature that both highlights and subverts the values of assimilation and the paternalistic attitude of the majority of white Australians at the time, as shown in the way in which the Aboriginal minority is represented as Other and treated condescendingly. This educates the audience on the possible forms of racial discrimination and hypocrisy present within society, resulting in many stereotypical representations which consequently cause the marginalisation of certain groups. Parallels that exist between possessing a certain value or belief, and the subsequent action of physically upholding it, are created within the play to provide the audience with the message that one's idealised intentions towards another does not necessarily lead to favourable results. Through an emphasis on the negative aspects of assimilation and the paternalistic treatment of others, an appreciation of cultural diversity and independence is enhanced and racial tolerance is encouraged.