

## Writing Women: Gender, Identity and Representation in *Coonardoo* and *A Kindness Cup*

SUE KOSSEW, UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

This paper is an exploration into the writing and re-presentation of what has been termed, variously, the settler woman, the pioneer woman and the white woman, none of which terms I find entirely satisfactory. I became interested in the subject-position of the settler woman via my work on the South African novelist, J.M. Coetzee, who has used white women narrators in three of his seven novels.<sup>1</sup> It seemed to me that the voice of this white woman narrator was an appropriate one for embodying the kinds of intersections of gender, race, class and colonialism, of power and disempowerment, of privilege and deprivation, of belonging and unbelonging, which characterise the ambivalent position of 'colonising women', those in the settler-invader colonies who occupy such an uneasy positionality,<sup>2</sup> caught between conflicting loyalties and ties to nation, motherhood, domestic space and the land itself. Now while male writers and artists have often characterised her as mother of the nation, as battler, as drover's wife—sturdy, brave and adaptable—or as sacrificial lamb, too vulnerable to survive attempted settlement; or in such marginalising constructions as 'damned whores' or 'god's police' (as in Ann Summers' book); or, more ambivalently, as 'monsters of virtue' (Leslie Fiedler's memorable term), I am interested in examining how settler *women* writers have themselves represented this settler woman figure, and how they have seen her in relation to land and identity. To what extent are the issues raised by and in the work of these earlier women settler writers still important in twentieth-century Australian women's writing? Tracy Meszaros suggests that there *are* continuing implications for contemporary reading practice in her analysis of Kate Grenville's *Joan Makes History* when she states that 'any feminist cultural project which does not acknowledge the complicity of white women with the nationalist, 'home-making' project, will merely reinscribe the female citizen within a nation that remains the protector and bearer of a white, masculine, middle class hegemony' (29). Susan Sheridan, in her book, *Along the Faultlines*, also suggests a future direction for what she calls 'postcolonial feminists': an exploration 'on the faultlines where tensions and collisions between 'sex', 'race' and 'nation' become visible' (169).

I have found it helpful here, while acknowledging differences in cultural specificities, to theorise the settler woman by examining the ways in which feminist critics in other 'settler-invader colonies' have approached this subject. Dorothy Driver, for example, has pointed out the contradictory and ambivalent position occupied by white South African women in the colonial equation. While imperial discourse and patriarchal signifying systems tend to place white women and the indigenous people in the same category of abject otherness, white women, she suggests, are also assigned a 'mediatory role', which, in turn, places them, as writers, in a position where their 'sympathy for the oppressed and their simultaneous entrapment within the oppressive group on whose behalf they may desire to mediate complicates their narrative stance'

(13). Similarly, Robin Visel has pointed out the inadequacy of the notion of a 'double colonisation' of women that does not take account of the cultural, social and material differences between native colonised women and their settler 'sisters'. Visel states that the colonised woman occupies a very different position from that of the white woman coloniser in that 'although she [the woman coloniser] too is oppressed by white men and patriarchal structures, she shares in the power and guilt of the colonists' (39). Thus, Visel describes her position as 'half-colonised' rather than 'doubly colonised'. As Cecily Lockett says about the comparably invidious position of contemporary white South African women critics: 'This makes our position especially difficult, since we may identify with black women but they are more likely to view us as agents of their oppression' (17).

That this theoretical position is applicable, too, to Australian women's writing is emphasised in Gillian Whitlock's reminder of the 'complex cultural context' of Australian women's writing, the analysis of which, she believes, should take into account 'the female subject as a site of difference ... the ongoing effects of a masculinist nationalist mythology, the legacy of a settler colonialism, the dispossession of the indigene, and, most recently, the effects of post war immigration ...'. Like the South African women critics, she reminds us, too, that 'women at different moments in history have been both oppressed and oppressive, submissive and subversive, victim and agent, allies and enemies both of men and of one another' (242).

Both Katharine Susannah Prichard and Thea Astley have written, in their novels *Coonardoo* and *A Kindness Cup*, of the relationship between settler culture and land in terms of their imaging of the settler woman. There seem to be a number of common aspects explored in both novels: most importantly, the relationship between settler/white woman and indigenous Australians; the white woman's relationship with the land and its masculinist construction (as explored more generally by Kay Schaffer in *Women and the Bush*); white women's response to constructions of nation, what Fiona Giles calls 'the unstable relationship between female subjectivity and nationalism' (147) and the white woman's role as mother-figure and wife, both within the family and within the discourse of nationhood. It is in the figure of the settler woman then, in particular, and in the work of settler women writers, that some of the paradoxes of settler identity and gender become more clearly focussed: issues of being 'at home'; of finding ways of belonging to the land and its people; and of alienation from colonial and patriarchal structures and institutions which exclude/prevent women from having a voice or which make them complicit.

Prichard's characterization of the white women characters in *Coonardoo*, and, particularly, of Mrs Bessie Watt, invites a rereading in terms of settler woman identity. While Mrs Bessie is gendered in masculine terms (as a 'wiry, restless figure in a pair of trousers, white shirt, and old hat of Ted's' (14), and is obviously the 'right sort' of pioneer woman needed for settling and farming, she is also a mother figure. This gender and social doubleness is reflected in the name given to her by the aborigines, 'Mumae'. While mimicking the sound the 'mummy' in English, it means 'father' in the Aboriginal dialect, so that Mrs Bessie takes on both these roles by standing in for her dead husband's authority as 'master': 'was not Mrs Bessie, father and mother to her son, the woman master of Wyaliba' (3). For the settler woman to survive, it seems, she has to enter into the 'man's world' of colonial authority. This complex dynamic of survival, mothering and mastery extends to her attitude towards Aborigines. We are told early in the novel that 'Mrs Bessie prided herself on treating her blacks kindly, and having a good working understanding with them. She would stand no nonsense, and

refused to be sentimental' (8-9). She seems to exhibit a number of the qualities that Barbara Ramusack ascribes to what she calls 'maternal imperialists', those white women in India who exercised 'a benevolent maternal imperialism ... [who were] frequently referred to as mothers or saw themselves as mothering India and Indians' (133).

This ambivalent combination of ownership ('her' blacks) and nurture is exhibited, too, in Prichard's figuring of Mrs Bessie's complex relationship with Coonardoo, in particular. While respecting Coonardoo's beliefs, and not trying to 'europeanise' her, as she calls it, she nonetheless draws the line at certain 'native practices'. This contradiction is presented by Prichard in two closely proximate passages narrating Mrs Bessie's attitude to Aboriginality. Mrs Bessie is adamant that she 'would not allow any Christianizing of the aborigines on Wyalaliba' and that 'aborigines on Wyalaliba should remain aborigines'. It is for this reason, the narration suggests, that Coonardoo who 'all day ... was Mrs Bessie's shadow, and learned to wait on and do everything for her ... always at sunset ... went off with her people and slept with the dogs by her father's campfire' (14). Is it only with hindsight that this passage seems to speak so suggestively of the Robinson Crusoe/Friday paradigm; or did Prichard sense the problematics of this kind of exhibition of maternal imperialism? The second passage which exhibits a similar ambivalence is just a few paragraphs further on, when Mrs Bessie is told that Coonardoo would be 'Warieda's woman' when she was old enough. Coonardoo herself is 'filled with pride and pleasant anticipation at the thought of being the wife of Warieda'. But Mrs Bessie does not approve despite her carefulness 'not to interfere with her natives in any of their own ways and customs' (16). Again, the text is equivocal about the reasons for her disapproval of this particular custom. She cites Coonardoo's youth as part of her reason, but admits that 'she was not quite sure herself why she was so opposed to Warieda taking the girl' (17): settling in the end for its interfering with her plan 'attaching Coonardoo to herself and Wyalaliba' (17). Her motherly protectiveness towards Coonardoo (she tells Warieda that she is 'fond of Coonardoo' and that 'she is my own girl' (16) is counteracted by her sense of ownership ('I will give her to you'), again, redolent with Crusoe-like attitudes.

For both Mrs Bessie, and for her son, Hugh, Coonardoo represents a link with the land which is only available to, and maybe through, the indigene. It is only through this 'indigenisation' that Terry Goldie suggests, whites in settler-invader colonies can become 'native' and feel a sense of belonging. This 'impossible necessity', which is an appropriation as well as an annexation of indigenes identity, is neatly captured in this passage from *Coonardoo*:

Mrs Bessie realized that however she might teach and train Coonardoo in the ways of a white woman, teach her to cook and sew, be clean and tidy, she would always be an aborigine of the aborigines. Not that Mrs Bessie wanted to take Coonardoo out of her element. She did not, but she was jealous of an influence on the child greater than her own. She did not wish to lose Coonardoo. Her people did not wish to lose Coonardoo either. She was theirs by blood and bone, and they were weaving her to the earth and to themselves, through all her senses, appetites and instincts. (26)

The contradictions portrayed here in Mrs Bessie's attitude towards Coonardoo graphically illustrate the settler predicament: the indigenous 'other' is perceived as the settlers' link to the land and to belonging, but the contact between settler and other has already irrevocably changed indigenes culture. Thus, the word 'lose' takes on

ironic connotations: Coonardoo is already 'lost' to her own culture because she is bound in service to settler culture. These few examples should suffice to illustrate how effectively Prichard captures in the character of Mrs Bessie the contradictory 'liberal minded/enlightened' speaking position of the settler woman, a positionality of which Prichard herself must have been aware when researching the book.

The other settler women in the novel are also represented in relation to their degree of traditionally 'feminine' qualities, their ability to adapt to the land and their attitude towards Aborigines. Jessica, for example, is described as a 'silvertail' from the city who can't survive a winter on the station and whose sentimental song about roses in the garden of tomorrow (ironically echoing the To-morrow ranges of the local landscape) so annoys Mrs Bessie who 'hated weaklings' (43). Hugh's wife, Mollie, in contrast, starts off 'hopeful and adventurous' with Hugh encouraging her for being the 'right sort', 'a brick'. It soon becomes clear, however, that she takes her colonial role as 'madam' rather too seriously, her sense of ownership extending over the homestead and what she sees as 'her servants' (97): 'This is my home, these are my servants'. Her inherent racism emerges progressively, culminating, quite openly, in a discussion with Saul about Aborigines (117–8). As Mollie becomes more and more dependent on Coonardoo as her 'slave', so she grows to hate the station, the indigenous people and the landscape: 'She hated the hard arid plains, the blacks and every eyeful of grey withering trees and red earth' (132). She sees the country as being unsuitable for white women: 'It's a man's country ... It's only what a man wants, matters out here. A woman can go mad, or clear out, for all anybody cares' (134). That, of course, is what she ends up doing, clearing out, beaten by the bush.

Phyllis, the next generation, is shown to echo the masculine qualities of her grandmother, Mrs Bessie, from the early description of her, too, as a 'wiry, sunburnt little creature' (141). Her first appearance in the novel has her talking in Aboriginal dialect and getting beaten for it by Mollie (128). Like Mumae, she genders herself in masculine terms as Hugh's 'eldest son' (163). Like the others, her character is measured against her relationship with Coonardoo—she senses something about Coonardoo that Mollie had obviously completely missed, and something more than Mrs Bessie's paternalistic attitude: 'And in Coonardoo, Phyllis found not only the faithful woman who had served her mother and her grandmother, but something more. What, she did not quite know' (187). This 'something more' could be seen to be the link between Coonardoo and the land, a link that Phyllis senses and wishes to appropriate. She never finds out more than this, but this sense, at least, puts her ahead of the other white women before her.

While Prichard's text could be seen to reflect and even to enact the ambiguity that Susan Sheridan finds characteristic of 'the relationship of white Australian women writers to prevailing discourses of nationalism, race and gender', Thea Astley's *A Kindness Cup* is more obviously positioned in its fierce critique of racist, colonialist and nationalist discourses. Her white women characters, though, are, interestingly, similarly positioned as both colonised and colonising.

Although Astley's novels are most often narrated by men, the 1890s world and its 'growing pains' (49) where 'masculinity is top dog' (S) and 'dispersing the tribe' is code for massacring Aborigines, which is the setting for the flashbacks in the novel, is strongly critiqued in *A Kindness Cup*. Its narrator, Tom Dorahy, is a Classics teacher 'trapped in the pity of the past' (112) with a strong awareness of the tragic consequences of men's 'militaristic antics' (3) through his study of the Gallic Wars. His sensitivity to women and Aborigines marginalises him as a target for male aggression—

he is 'not and never will be a man among men' (79)<sup>3</sup>. It is interesting that both of the 'gentle' men in the novel, Dorahy and Lunt, are described by the other men as effeminate. (Freddie Buckmaster finds 'some elusive effeminacy' in Lunt's remarks on his return to the town after 18 years (105); and Armitage calls Dorahy a 'bloody unfrocked nun' and a 'nancy' (109)).

It is Astley's settler women characters in this novel, though, marginal as they are to the main action, who are interesting. Silenced by the male-dominated, brutal, nationalistic and anti-Aboriginal voices around them, they nevertheless try to find alternative ways of expressing their dissidence. Mrs Buckmaster is a good example of this representation of resistance. She is first described as 'forty and ruined, not so much by her husband as by the country and the tyranny of it' (10). That this tyranny, though, is not unrelated to the said husband is made clear in the subsequent exchanges between them. She defends Dorahy and Lunt, who have been accused of befriending Aborigines and labelled as 'gin lovers', by responding that 'they're kind to them. They think they're people' (11); and follows this up with the shocking statement (to her husband) that 'Christ's skin was probably as dark as theirs'. She responds to his accusation that she is 'sentimental and stupid' and that she'd be the 'first to squawk if a party of them [Aborigines] raped you' with the memorable rejoinder, aimed squarely at his own sexual brutality: 'I've never squawked at rape' (12). This subject position places her as mediator between masculine violence (what Dorahy describes as 'a horrible boil-up of masculinity' (63)) and the Aboriginal people, and she obviously identifies with Aborigines as fellow-victim of this late nineteenth-century Australian macho culture. This is very like Dorothy Driver's description cited earlier of the settler woman's 'mediatory role', a combination of sympathy and entrapment.

Gracie Tilburn, another settler woman character in the novel, while imaged as a flirtatious, shallow woman who has a wonderful singing voice, also has her moment of resistance at the end. It is she who delays her song to allow Boyd to make his speech about Lunt; and in rushing to the footlights to plead for silence from the restless crowd, the shock and outrage of 'a woman ... assert[ing] herself among men' brings about a temporary lull. Yet it is her complicity that is emphasised as well: for while the 'hate-pack' are beating up the truth-tellers outside the hall, her voice 'rises liquidly in song' as she sings *Auld Lang Syne*. Astley encapsulates this betrayal as she counterpoints the groans of the men being beaten with Gracie's voice which 'soars and falls in nostalgic untruth'. It is this voice which encourages the audience to join in the choruses; and the final words of the novel underline the way Gracie's voice actually enables the townspeople of the present-time narration (said by Astley to be in the twenties) to blot out the unpleasant wound from the past which had been uncovered: 'it has almost forgotten the victims already'. Once again, the settler woman is positioned as both resisting and complicit, as a voice of conscience and a voice to soothe the guilt of past atrocities. The text is also one which, as Elizabeth Perkins points out, consistently undermines its own authority, drawing attention to the ways in which the 'truth' is always overwritten/overridden by language itself (11-18). In this way, it can also be seen to enact Astley's own awareness of a lack of authority and voice; her awareness of a certain ironic positionality as a woman writer in Australia which aligns her with the speaking position of Dorahy, the truth-teller whom no-one wants to hear. As she is reported to have said in an interview:

I grew up in an era when women weren't supposed to have any thoughts at all, and if they did express thoughts then either no attention was paid to them or they were considered brash and aggressive ... women writers were ignored, or

whatever women did was ignored ... I thought to myself that the only way one could have any sort of validity was to write as a male. (109)

The contradiction involved in this taking on of a masculine voice which itself is rejecting masculinist ideas certainly positions the woman writer in a most ambiguous and paradoxical space, a space which seems to encompass not just her settler women characters but her very text itself.

In summary, then, any attempt to theorise or position the settler woman has to traverse borders and boundary lines: those between belonging and displacement, between notions of self and other, between nation and home, between white woman and indigenous others, and between prescribed constructions of femininity and masculinity within nationalist discourse. It is in these negotiations that the profound ambivalence of the settler woman's positionality may be located—in writing by and of women—a complex mixture of resistance and complicity, of authority and lack of authority.

#### Notes

- 1 See Sue Kossew, 'Women's Words': A Reading of J.M. Coetzee's Women Narrators' in *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee* ed. Sue Kossew (New York: G.K. Hall, 1997), previously published in *SPAN: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* 37 (December 1993): 12–23.
- 2 This term is developed by Linda Alcoff in her 'Cultural Feminism versus Post-structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory', *Signs* 13 (3): 405–436. She writes:  
... the concept of positionality includes two points; first... that the concept of woman is a relational term identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context, but, second, that the position that women find themselves in can be actively utilized (rather than transcended) as a location for the construction of meaning, a place from where meaning is constructed, rather than simply the place where a meaning can be discovered ... (Alcoff 1988: 434).
- 3 It is interesting to note that J.M. Coetzee uses a female narrator who is also a Classics lecturer, Elizabeth Curren in his novel, *Age of Iron* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1990). Like Dorahy, she too is both aware of the consequences of the 'age of iron' but is also part of this age herself, which makes her Cassandra-voice somewhat compromised, as she herself is fully aware. Dorahy reflects on his teaching of the Classics as ironic in 'this scraggy landscape that bore the frightful sores of its own history—shattered black flesh, all the more horrible because of the country's negation'(47).

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