Wicked: Postcolonial Turmoil in the 'Other' Oz

By Samantha Parks

Introduction

Gregory Maguire's novel, Wicked, a deconstruction of L. Frank Baum's The Wizard of Oz, paints a bleak picture of the 'other' side of Oz. No longer is Munchkinland a place of peace, but a site for political uprising. In the Emerald City, an outsider has usurped the throne and sweeps the continent with a contingent known as the Gale Force. Some strangers, such as the Wizard and Dorothy, are revered for their exoticism while other oddballs, such as Elphaba, the 'Wicked' Witch of the West and the Quadlings such as Turtle Heart, are shunned or scorned. A religious war against the pleasure faith is raging under the guidance of the Unnamed God, and a lone priest and his family are fighting for the souls of the atheistic Quadlings. Because political turbulence is the driving force of Maguire's revolutionary novel, the postcolonial ideas of "otherness" and cultural reconciliation dominate the new Oz. Through a comparison of the trials of key characters to the trials of those living in real-world postcolonial environments, it will be argued that one of Maguire's main purposes in writing Wicked may have been to highlight sociopolitical inequities in order to advocate for human rights.

An Exploration of "Otherness" in Oz

The idea of "otherness" is a concept central to postcolonial criticism, the lens through which we will view Wicked and explore the sociopolitical climate of Oz. In order for a postcolonial mindset to be established, the colonists first assert themselves as "good" or "civil" in purpose, while the colonized are "others," "barbaric," or "wicked." In rare cases, the colonized people may be considered worthy of awe and fear: "exotic." To deal with the hardship of
suddenly being "others" within their own nation, colonized citizens must give up their cultural heritage and their religion in order to be accepted by the culture that now dominates the region. The colonized may exhibit what is known as "double-consciousness." Outwardly, they portray themselves as fully assimilated members of the new culture (this is known as mimicry), while through folklore and in their private lives, they uphold the traditions and beliefs of their pre-colonized nation. According to an article by Susan Ritchie, folklore has long had a "commitment to the disenfranchised," and "presumes to speak on the behalf of some voiceless group or individual" (366). In other words, folklore becomes incredibly important in places where a group has been marginalized, such as within a colonized nation. Often, colonized individuals experience feelings of being out of place within their own home; in postcolonial criticism, this is known as unhomeliness. These postcolonial ideas resonate throughout the culture of Oz.

Within Wicked, we see that some outsiders (such as Dorothy or the Wizard) are revered and feared as "exotic" creatures of power, while others (such as the Animals) are condemned as "primitive." There are also many instances where Maguire deliberately placed nursery rhymes, parables, and other folklore within his fictional novel. It is simple to see how these postcolonial trends came to be a norm across the land of Oz based on the folklore, history, and political movements/criticism that Maguire weaves throughout his tale of Elphaba. These trends become even clearer when compared to the real-world ideologies of postcolonial nations such as India and Algeria.

The wake of colonization is almost always followed by a period of religious conversion; for example, when the French conquered Algiers in the summer of 1830, those under the duc de Vermont declared the "Christian conversion of Algerian Muslims [as] a duty that Providence has bestowed upon France" (Naylor 723). From then on, the French flag was flown from the top of
one of the nation's most famous mosques, which the Muslims saw as an act of evangelism and eradication of their Islamic culture. Even as the French converted mosques to churches, the Church conducted charity work which led to mixed feelings about the settlers. Many of these settlers practiced what was referred to as "African Catholicism...a religion of rites and ceremonies, an external religion" (724); in other words, the settlers themselves were not particularly faithful but merely went through the motions. One Muslim leader, Abd al-Qadir, used military forces to fight against the colonizers, who he declared "irreligious" (724). A bishop of the time declared Algeria to be only one nation in "a barbaric continent of 200 million souls" (725).

The work of Frex, a unionist minister, is more than slightly reminiscent of this very incident. At the beginning of the novel, Frex is attempting to hold the members of his small village of Rush Margins to the unionist faith. He perceives that the town is "at a crossroads. Idolatry looms. Traditional values [are] in jeopardy. Truth [is] under siege and virtue abandoned" (Maguire, 9). The threat that he fights is the new wave of "the pleasure faith" from the Emerald City, along with the advent of tic-tockism, which holds steam-punk creations of ingenuity on high as idols. An example of this is the Time dragon a "fake oracle" that teeters atop a standing puppet theater that works via clockwork and magic. The dragon is crafted of copper discs covered in leather, breathes fire, and functions as a prophet of doom, with a clock beneath it whose hands are painted at one minute to midnight (Maguire 11-12). Tic-tokism and the pleasure faith both grew when the Wizard usurped the throne from Ozma; he employs both sorcery and mechanical ingenuity in maintaining his authority over the land of Oz.

Later within the text, the missionary work of Frex and his family is described with brevity in multiple scenes. Essentially, Frex followed the tide of miners, construction workers,
and militia into Quadling country in order to save their souls through conversion; they were dying rapidly as a result of food shortages and violent oppression due to the draining of the marshes in order to find rubies (135). In other words, after being a victim of postcolonial assimilation, he himself became a colonizer. According to Elphaba, Frex thought that "a Quadling corpse found floating faceup in a brackwater pond--provided it had a tattoo of conversion on it somewhere--was better off than a survivor" (195). This logic hauntingly echoes the bishop's words about 200 barbaric souls. At one point Frex himself comments directly on the postcolonial world of turmoil that he lives in, stating: "The more civil we become, the more brutal our entertainments" (320).

Lurlinism, whose folklore is depicted many times throughout the book, persists in Shiz as a remnant of the reign of Ozma, who was considered to be a descendant of the Fairy Queen Lurline. The religion is largely pagan, with beliefs such as how she drunkenly pissed the Gillikin River, created animals from clods of earth, and Animals from the animals who managed to swim across the river (114). Royalists still faithful to Ozma practice the tradition of hanging green and gold lanterns on Lurlinemas; this practice was adopted by the Unionist faith in order to appease the colonized by continuing some of their most recognized traditions (207).

Perhaps no greater example of brutal entertainment exists within Oz as the segregation and torture of the Animals. This example of racism is not an isolated case throughout the novel, nor is it rare in places such as Algeria, where Arabs were considered Other and tortured and enslaved (Naylor 729). In Wicked, we are first introduced to the plight of the Animals via G(a)linda's discourse with Dr. Dillamond, a Goat, while aboard the train to Shiz. He complains: "I object to the term beast. But the laws still allow my traveling in first class, I presume?" (65). Following this, he goes on to discuss the financial extortion of Animals, who have to pay three
times as much for the same ticket as a human (65). Soon after this, the head of the school reads off anti-Animal propaganda as *poetry*. Consider the following example:

Alas! For impropriety,
The guillotine of piety.
To rememdy society
Indulge not to satiety
In mirth and shameless gaiety.
Choose sobering sobriety.
Behave as if the deity
Approaches in its mystery,
And greet it with sonority.
Let your especial history
Be built upon sorority
Whose Virtues do exemplify,
And Social Good thus multiply.

*Animals should be seen and not heard* (84).

There are two things that stand out within this poem, that connect the ideas of religion and race as Other. Note how the poem seems speaks of "Virtue" and a "the deity/Approaches in its mystery." These seem to be direct references to the Unnamed God of Unionism. The final line is thus a triple-entendre; it implies that those without morals are animals and should not speak, it implies that Animals cannot have morals, and it also directly states that Animals should not speak but only be seen as common livestock. This is a huge political statement. Going back to the idea of brutal entertainment, when Elphaba returns to Munchkinland to check up on the ruling of her sister Nessarose, she finds that there is a "Cow who expects to be a blood victim"
Given that these Animals have full consciousness, such a sacrifice is the equivalent of genocide or the lynchings that happened in the Civil Rights movement.

There is another poem within the text, this one a nursery rhyme, that outlines the racism that separates Oz. It reads:

Boys study, girls know,
That's the way that lessons go.
Boys learn, girls forget,
That's the way of lessons yet.
Gillikinese are sharp as knives,
Munchkinlanders lead corny lives,
Glikkuns beat their ugly wives,
Winkies swarm in sticky hives.
But the Quadlings, Oh the Quadlings,
Slimy stupid curse-at-godlings,
Eat their young and bury their old
A day before their bodies get cold.

*Give me an apple and I'll say it again.*

This poem gives a short, succinct stereotype for each of the major races found in Oz. The Gillikinese are the most industrialized; thus they also have the best Universities and economy. They are also meant to have sharp tongues. The Munchkinlanders are supposedly simple, and have an agriculturally based culture. Not much is known about the Glikkuns other than that they are ugly; while the Winkies, who live in the Vinkus, are actually a tribal people; and the Quadlings are a people of the marshes with little concept of religion. Within this rhyme, each race is separated as its own form of Other, which later leaves the people unable to resist the Wizard's secret service, the Gale Force, even in the face of twelve to one odds (202).
Fiyero, a prince from the Vinkus, is a prime example of this racial Othering, as well as an example of mimicry and double-consciousness. When Fiyero finds Elphaba years after her disappearance, she comments that, "Shiz got to you…Listen to those graduate school affectations. Where's the native boy reeking that appealing naivete like a well-chosen musk?" (184). Fiyero, though still an Arjiki prince with a wife and children back home, splits his year between business in the Vinkus and business in Shiz. While in Shiz, he puts on the affectations of any other well-bred businessman or woman, such as G(a)linda's political correctness. Meanwhile, he is always aware of the customs of his home, never forgetting skills such as how to track an animal through the forest (a skill which he uses to pursue Elphaba in the first place) (182). It is this double-consciousness and mimicry that allow him to survive in both sociopolitical scenes.

Of course, the ultimate example of Othering within Wicked is the Witch herself, Elphaba. From the very beginning, Elphaba is established as Other based on the color of her skin. When with her father Frex in Quadling country, she is used as a tool for promoting the mercy of the Unnamed God, and because of this and her extreme isolation, is never able to embrace religion (195). As an atheist, she is Other. Even in love, Elphaba casts herself as the 'other woman' while working as a radical against the political injustices she sees (195). When she finally dons the title of the Wicked Witch of the West, the toll that this Othering has had on her is quite visible. Though she identifies as an atheist, when asked what she wishes for the most, she has a slip of the tongue and says "a soul--" (387). What this reveals is that Elphaba sees herself as so far removed from society that she does not believe she has a soul, while simultaneously revealing her hidden desire to be loved and accepted. It is this lack of love and acceptance, which she
found only in her time with lover Fiyero and in her brief days of schooling, that drives her to become truly Wicked.

Cases of the radicalism that Elphaba exhibits are not uncommon in real world postcolonial environments. In an article by Peri Kedem and Mordechai Bar-Lev, a study was done on students raised under political socialization—which happens in colonized nations. The study focused on school children, and tried to assess how the student's academic behavior corresponded with their political attitude. What the study found was that students raised in such an environment were far more likely to become involved in youth groups which "are ideologically and structurally linked to adult parties" and "could have been considered as groups of protest or intergenerational rebellion" at their start (394). Like Elphaba, who remained outspoken through her adult life, and continued research into Animals through work with Chistery, these youth are liable to remain politically active as adults.

In sharp contrast to the absolute Otherness of Elphaba, to the point where she is demonized by society, Dorothy is idolized for her Otherworldliness. Dorothy is described as "a holy little girl, ordinary and sanctified just as any child is" (36) by Milla as Elphaba, now the Witch, is hunting the girl down in a desperate attempt to retrieve the ruby shoes.

**Conclusion**

Louis Tyson asserts that a postcolonial text is any "literature produced by cultures that developed in response to colonial domination from the first point of colonial contact to the present" (Tyson, ?) How then is *Wicked* a postcolonial text? If you consider that America was colonized by the British, and was waging a "War on Terror" at the time when *Wicked* being written, subsequently invading and pushing ideals on Islamic countries, *Wicked* becomes a much
more concrete example of a postcolonial text. It was written out of a postcolonial mindset, in critique of modern day colonization. When asked about his inspiration for writing Wicked, Maguire said, "I was interested to see how my own blood temperature chilled at reading a headline in the usually cautious British newspaper, the Times of London: Sadaam Hussein: The New Hitler? I caught myself ready to have a fully—formed political opinion about the Gulf War and the necessity of action against Sadaam Hussein on the basis of how that headline made me feel" ("Q and A"). He then related how this made him think long and hard about the nature of evil, to the point where he considered writing a novel about Hitler. He commented: "I became interested in the nature of evil, and whether one really could be born bad. I considered briefly writing a novel about Hitler, but discarded the notion due to my general discomfort with the reality of those times. But when I realized that nobody had ever written about the second most evil character in our collective American subconscious, the Wicked Witch of the West, I thought I had experienced a small moment of inspiration" ("Q and A")

In other words, as is so evident in a postcolonial world, we are all products of our environment. While most American's ignore the headlines which happened to strike Maguire, be it due to fear or lack of interest, we all seem to flock to fantasy. Thus, what better way to spread a realization on human nature than to write about an iconic character of fantasy? In this way, Maguire was able to weave in much of the political turmoil of the Gulf War era (epitomized by the Wizard) in such a way that people would internalize the criticism without realizing that it was just that, postcolonial criticism of a nation at war. Maguire puts his own words in Elphaba's mouth for all to read, as she is quoted in the second part of the novel saying "This one is thinking about good and evil…Whether they really exist at all" (79). Because of the novel's ties to real-world issues and debates, it is essential to view the text as nothing short of a postcolonial
masterpiece; learn from it, and dispel the ideas of Otherness that divide nations and races, and allow terror to reign. Good and evil are defined by society and its politics. Thus, they are as inherently fallible as society itself. The real War on Terror will not happen with guns, but with minds, and above all, this is the point that Maguire's *Wicked* drives home the hardest.
Works Cited


