

Coromandel Sea Change Short Guide

Coromandel Sea Change by Rumer Godden

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Characters

a small resort hotel at the Corolnmandel coast, an assorted group of guests is thrown together for a week.

There is an elderly couple, a group of Indian politicians who are arranging the campaign of a local candidate, Krishnan, and especially, a young English couple on their honeymoon.

Blaise, the young, handsome diplomat, represents the arrogance and insensitivity of a British colonial upper class.

He despises things Indian and cannot understand that his young bride, Mary, is magnetically drawn to the country and its people. Mary's interest in India and its people creates several confrontations with her husband, but the real reason for these quarrels is the fact that Mary realizes that her marriage to the self-important and selfish young man was a mistake. This she realizes as she meets the young Indian candidate, Krishnan, who is trying to restore ancient values by drawing upon Indian legend, mythology, and philosophy.

Like his namesake, the God Krishna, he attracts people through his spiritual qualities, and his sincere wishes to help. As a political candidate, he draws from the wisdom and nobility of the ancient faith, and for Mary he opens glimpses of a world she has longed for, as well as a possibility to belong. Mary, drawn into the magical circle of Krishna, explains to her angry husband "he has taught me to love."

Dr. Coomaraswamy is an elderly, fussy, and pessimistic physician who is the campaign manager for Krishnan, whose unhappy marriage makes him dream about the allure of the young female hotel manager, Kuku. But Kuku is unfailingly interested in Blaise, who to her represents everything that is high class, European, and unattainable.

Each of the major characters plays a dual role — as him/herself and as a symbolic representative of the two worlds that are confronting each other.

Mary, like many of Godden's heroines, is dominated, first by her father and then by her husband whom she married rashly in an act of rebellion against a life she despises. Unfortunately, she discovers too late, that Blaise is insensitive, and neither understands nor wishes to know her. For her, India offers freedom, a chance to finally be herself. As she immerses herself into the world of Krishnan, she finds a spirituality which has been missing from her existence, and through it, a new independence.

Blaise cannot understand his wife's fascination with India. He only sees a physical betrayal in her attraction to Krishnan. In an almost unconscious act of revenge, he lets



himself be seduced by Kuku, but when he realizes what he has done, he angrily swims out into the ocean, disregarding all warnings, and becomes a victim of the sharks.

The rest of the characters — the hotel guests, campaign workers, and staff — are more shadowy. They represent the different aspects of modern India.

There are the servants, conservative, moral, and old-fashioned, reminiscent of the old colonial empire. Modern India is seen in the young men and women who are campaign workers for Krishnan. They are idealistic and devoted. Kuku, the hotel manager, is young, sensual, and an ardently uncritical admirer of everything that is Western. She is selfish and self-serving but attains a certain nobility in her love for Blaise, a love which he neither desires nor values. Finally there is Aunt Sanni, wise, philosophical, and pragmatic. But not all Indians are perfect. The boys who torment the donkey and the squirrel on the beach are as much part of the national character, and so is Kanu, the adolescent who spies for the evil Mr. Menzies and who becomes a victim himself.

The European hotel guests are flat characters. There are the almost caricatures of the "cultural" ladies, a group of university people who are studying the archeological ruins in the area, the old-fashioned, elegant Fishers, and Olga, the faithful wife, whose secret is exposed by the evil Mr. Menzies.



Social Concerns

Coromandel Sea Change contrasts the attitudes of former British colonials and the Indian philosophy of tolerance and empathy with all things living. The juxtaposition of East and West at the hotel spans the entire spectrum of historical roles in the relationship between India and England. India is represented by the elderly Indian servants of the hotel who are straitlaced, very British, and very much "empire," as well as the young, progressive followers of Krishnan, the worldly, sensual young Kuku who longs for western things, and the spiritual and charismatic leader Krishnan himself who draws upon ancient philosophy and beliefs.

The European guests also display a variety of attitudes toward India — the upright, serious old timers like John and Lady Fisher, representing old colonial aristocracy, Blaise, the arrogant young Britisher who looks down on the primitive natives, and Mary, the sensitive young woman looking for a place to belong and to love. Even absolute evil is present in the person of the journalist, Mr. Mencias, who unscrupulously exploits people for the sake of a sensational story or a bit of blackmail.

Godden is thoroughly familiar with the postcolonial Indian world. In this novel, even more so than in her earlier ones, the confrontation between two cultures is strongly delineated, and her characters take on almost symbolic qualities. The clash of civilizations is resolved positively in the Half-Indian proprietress of Patna Hall, Auntie Sannie whose wisdom, practicality, and tact span the gap.



Techniques

Godden's style is unique and very effective. Short, almost tag, phrases are used to characterize subtle points of character. Krishnan is always referred to as "blue black" — echoing the blue color of the mythological God. And Godden's vivid scenarios create the lush, opulent countryside of Southern India, both its nature and its people.

The mass scenes from Krishnan's campaign are particularly effective since they are relayed not as direct experiences, but through the technique of using a narrator with only a limited understanding, the fussy, frantic Dr.

Gooswami, almost a caricature of the Indian civil servant. There is a feeling of unreality in the ancient grove on the coast where Mary spends a night with Krishnan, washing an elephant. Everywhere in the novel, reality is not far removed from the mystical, but reality is not a separate entity, the two merge easily and seamlessly.

As in Godden's earlier novels, the meeting of East and West is not easily resolved. In *The Peacock Spring* (1976), the young heroine has been sent to Europe to keep her from her fascination with her Indian lover. Mary, a mature woman, can make her own choices, but even after her husband's death, she is still attracted to India.

Her vow to serve in the slums of Calcutta is somewhat unmotivated, but there are strong hints that her relationship with Krishnan is not over. The changing face of India is also shown at the end by the metamorphosis of the mystical Krishnan into an elegant young politician, very much part of a modern world.

Themes

The unity of creation that underlies Hindu mythology is brought out by the various animals that play an important part, from the humble donkey Slippers to Birdie the elephant and the little squirrel. Krishnan seems to have an almost magical relationship with these creatures, underscoring his mythological qualities.

The theme of marriage is another element in this novel. Mary's marriage is unhappy because her husband is insensitive to her needs, but the fault also lies in her since she sees her marriage as a trap, and strongly resents her husband and all he stands for. In contrast to this is the marriage of John and Lady Fisher, an old-fashioned union with a subservient wife who reminds Mary that she is not playing her part. Another marriage, referred to only indirectly is the unsatisfactory union of Dr. Coomaraswamy and his domineering wife, which leads him to dream of Kuku, a sensual wish-fulfilment which he, himself, considers to be ridiculous.

The conflict of good and evil takes several forms — the political conflict between the corrupt Indian political system of Mrs. Retty, the opposing candidate, and of Krishnan, her sincere rival. But India is not only spirituality and goodness. There is evil such as in the innocent cruelty of the boys torturing the squirrel and in Kanu's role as a spy. And there is the senseless, destructive joy of evil for evil's sake, which drives the despicable journalist, Mr. Menzies. Typically, he is not defeated by the idealistic goodness of Krishna but by the practical common sense of Auntie Sannie who uses Mencie's weapons of blackmail against him.

The innocent amorality of Kuku stands between the two worlds, not part of either but existing only for herself. She represents the sensuality of the ancient Hindu gods, self-justified and instinctive.



Key Questions

In *Coromandel Sea Change*, Godden presents the reader with an exotic and glittering world, but the issues and characters she creates are very much part of our own. Her conflict is much more than just a confrontation between East and West, it is also a conflict between men and women, between arrogance and sensitivity. It is the story of an awakening — Mary's — towards a more spiritual way of life. This is also an issue in *The Greengage Summer* (1958) — a young girl's maturing through a sincere love, and in her convent novel *In This House of Brede* (1969). Discussion groups might want to focus on the man/woman conflict as a feminine spiritual Eastern attitude versus a masculine, active, selfish Western stance. It is interesting that in most of Godden's novels, the spiritual side is almost exclusively represented by women, while the masculine heroes are bright, flashy and insensitive, concerned only with their ego.

1. Godden only briefly alludes to Mary's courtship and love for Blaise.

Why did she marry him? Did she ever understand him? What is the role her father played in driving her into the relationship?

2. Godden strongly suggests that Krishnan is a reincarnation of the ancient God Krishna. But Krishna is only one aspect of the trinity of Krishna the Creator, Brahma the Preserver, and Vishnu, the destroyer. Does Krishnan show evidence of the other two aspects? Did he cause Blaise's death?

Does Krishnan have a dark side, too?

3. Although Godden's point of view in this novel is omniscient, does she favor any of the characters above the others? We fully understand Mary, but do we also understand Blaise? Does she have a bias against the Europeans?

The European males?

4. The title *Sea Change* is suggestive.

The sea not only changes, it also affects change. What type of changes does the sea affect in the novel? Are these hostile or peaceful changes? Do they concern only individual, or do they have a wider application?

5. Kuku and Mary are antagonists, presenting different aspects of femininity. Is it possible to say that Mary is good and Kuku evil, or would this oversimplify Godden's ideas. Is Mary deficient in some of the qualities Kuku possesses? Are these qualities seen as positive or negative? And why does the novel end with the birth of Kuku's child?

6. Houses are used frequently as symbols in Godden's novels — note the religious house of Brede. In her autobiography she speaks of her life as "a house with four rooms." What does Patna Hall represent? Is there any significance in the fact that

Krishnan and Mary meet and interact not under a roof but in a grove? Does this tell something about the possibility and permanence of their relationship?

Literary Precedents

Godden's descriptions of India are sometimes reminiscent of Kipling at his best, without the latter's colonial morality. There are echoes of Graham Greene and Joseph Conrad in the confrontation with an exotic evil. Pearl Buck's novels, too, deal with the themes of interracial and intercultural relationships between Europeans and Asians.

Related Titles

Both *The River* (1946), and *The Peacock Springs* deal with European heroines and their confrontation with the culture of India. This confrontation becomes tragic in *Kingfishers Catch fire* (1953), where a young English woman attempts to become part of the Indian way of life, an attempt which is rejected by the natives, and almost costs the life of her young son.



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