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Intertwining of History of the Land and Australian Aboriginal Community in Poetry

Abstract

Poetry has fascinated mankind since time immemorial and nature has always been its major theme. But with the transition of mankind from the lap of nature to a digital age, the plenitude of nature began to be exploited. Massive destruction of the environment began as man started crossing his own territory to be the master of the world. Such seismic changes gave rise to environmentally oriented works which aimed at preventing an apocalypse. Colonization witnessed not only continental imperialism but also ecological imperialism. The paper Intertwining of History of the Land and Australian Aboriginal Community in Poetry aims to analyze the postcolonial changes that took place in Australia and America and how it is represented in poetry.

Keywords: Post- colonial, Environment, Contaminated communities, Ecological imperialism.

Ever since the famed and hypnotically interesting voyage of Christopher Columbus across the Atlantic, seldom has man dared to seek the truth underlying the surface fascination of the events depicted by the voyage on board the Santa Maria. Two worlds hailed as antipodes, and often found passing mentions in Viking voyages, fishermen stories were brought together on October 11, 1492. When biologists and historians decode these journeys to understand the biological homogeneity that the Old and New worlds were drifting to, ecologists and poets divert their focus on how well these tasks were accomplished along with its effects on the environment and on the other living things which belonged to the environment. Such studies are often necessitated by the understanding that "The viability and success of new modes of existing within the constraints of the environment and its resources require both an understanding of the past and an articulation of a new ethic for the future" (Cronon). According to Donald Worchester, the noted environmental historian English professors cannot help the reformation of the planet, but hey can help the understanding. It is true to say more than ecologists, historians, biologists, writers, especially poets can unfold before the lay man the truth about the planet in a language more palatable and pleasant to the senses. The paper

Anatomizing Post Columbian “Contaminated Communities” Represented in Contemporary American and Australian Poetry is an attempt to unmask how the history of mankind has changed in the post Columbian era and how these changes are presented in poetry. The analysis includes American poetry and Australian poetry mainly because these two continents witnessed the massive changes when Columbus, Vasco da Gama and Captain James Cook brought whole new worlds crashing into the area of European perception. A major share of poems produced in these countries in the post colonial era easily falls in the genre of environmental poetry.

To be called an environmental text Lawrence Buell puts forward the following criteria:

1. The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text (*The Environmental Imagination* 7).

Examined from these aspects the poems of Oodergoo Noonuccal can be placed in the canon of environmental poetry. Oodergoo Noonuccal’s poetry is distinctive and pioneering mainly because it is a reflection of a literary legacy that combines in it the principles and policies which she upheld in her life. It is poetry that is written from the standpoint of a historian, ecologist, and biologist and marked by ease of transition which carries the readers from the pre-Columbian to the post Columbian era. Her first volume of poetry, *We Are Going* (1964), is the first book by an Aboriginal woman to be published. *The Dawn at Hand* is poetry that has a strong moral or ethical vision, and it has its own worldview. It contains within it poems of protest against social injustice, as well as poems against environmental degradation since the coming of the white colonizers. They are poems that create social awareness, poems of protest and poems of environmental understanding. Critical studies can analyze these poems through any framework and that is the valid reason for the success of these poems. What is attempted here is an analysis of her poems through the framework of environmental history. “Then and Now” from *The Dawn at Hand* speaks of the Noonuccal’s desire she has for the aboriginal lifestyle to be like it was before white colonization. The Assimilation Policy forced the aborigines to change their life style and live apart from their traditional ways.

But dreams were shattered by rushing car

By grinding tram and hissing train

And I see no more of my tribe old

As I walk alone in the teeming town.

The arrival of the white settlers in 1788 imposed new customs and beliefs into the aboriginal people. The erosion of the traditional way of life resulted. Aboriginal names and customs faded. Leaving behind what was their own they were forced into towns and cities. Being one of the most urbanized countries in the whole world, land clearing in Australia brought in factories belching smoke where once according to Noonuccal yams were dug

from. This sense of displacement and destruction of their land is according to Tasmanian aboriginal activist Jim Everett: “like ripping pages from our library books, it is like cutting the hearts of our people, cutting our identity and our cultural philosophy that sustains our spiritual connectedness to country.”

Here where they have memorial park

One time lubras dug for yam

One time our dark children played

There where the railway yards are now

For the aborigines familiar land shapes of the land give form to intuitive feelings about life's deeper mysteries. Where Europeans locate a dead landscape the aborigines find a theatre of energy. It is this energy that is lost with the conversion of a barren land to banks, shops, advertisements and neon lights. A scroll through these places with which they are connected creates in them the excitement of a devout pilgrim traversing the holy places in Jerusalem. Amos Rapoport opines that the Australian aborigines feel that the land owns them- that they are the spiritual property of the land. This is how the aborigines experience the place as a whole and as suggested by the Greek term 'haptain'. This concept of haptic perception is “the perpetual system by which animals and men are literally in touch with the environment”. (Walter 134) It links the body to the environment enabling one to feel the world in one's bones. Where children played once, today they have railway yards. They have lost the soul of the place. To them the universe is a sacred place. Human relationships are filled with perceptions and meanings of haptic experience. The place where lubras dug for yam is no more there. Active exploratory touch permits both the grasping of an object and a grasp of its meanings. The lubras, in touch with the environment had a knowledge of the earth and its meanings. When railway yards took over the places where the children played haptic perception is lost. There are only memorial parks. Such architectural structures are raised by man to contribute to his mental health, power and pleasure. The arrival of the white colonizers stole them of their land and their peace with murder and rape. Her words convey a profound dispossession a relationship shredded by modern civilization. This is an ignorance that result from an underdeveloped appreciation for place and makes one feel and act as if nature can be controlled. Noonuccal presents this poem as a parable of the Australian frontier and an indictment of the reckless habits that quickly exhausted the land's natural richness and abundance. Wendell Berry, the American poet in his “Handing Down” puts it as “The mistakes of the old/ become the terrors of the young”. (Collected Poems 38)

These poets consider environment not merely as something just to be kept in mind but in the body as well. Acts of walking and digging thickens the perceptual scene welcoming one into a palpable density rather than drawing on out. The surrounding not just viewed as a picture but it is experienced. To the colonizer it is an act of pathatecture or the process of building feelings and meaning by the arrangement of material objects

especially through construction or dilapidation. To the aborigines it is on the other hand an act of topoclasm.

In “The Dispossessed” Oodgeroo Noonuccal speaks of the coming of the whites leaving the indigenous tribes dispossessed

The white man claimed your hunting grounds

And you could not remain

.....

They brought you Bibles and disease

The liquor and the gun

.....

A dying race you linger on

Degraded and oppressed

Outcasts in your own native land

You are the dispossessed.

According to Alfred Crosby :

“These killers came to the New World with the explorers and the conquistadors. The fatal diseases of the old world killed more effectively in the New, and the comparatively benign diseases of the Old World turned killer in the New. There is little exaggeration in the statement of a German missionary in 1699 that “the Indians die so easily that the bare look and smell of a Spaniard causes them to give up the ghost.” (The Columbian Exchange 37)

The aborigines lost their place and became an alienated lot. Modern alienation is a symptom of a lost sense of place. A mere sense of place will not salvage a place, but as Buell states:

What we require, then is neither disparagement nor celebration of place-sense but an account of those specific conditions under which it significantly furthers....environmental humility, an awakened place awareness that is also mindful of its limitations and respectful that place moulds us as well as vice versa.(253)

Place, the primal tradition of the human race is the culture of hunting, fishing and gathering. This was the only way of life for more the majority of the time the human race existed. With the peopling of the earth it spread everywhere, was typical of early groups in Africa Eurasia, America and Australia and persisted in Mayallaluk (“Frog Dreaming Place” in Northern Australia) up to the twentieth century. But the hunters approached the animals and plants with reverence, killed them only when necessary and treated them with honour even after killing. Such cultural habits helped to adapt humans to the environment and to maintain balance with it.

We are the food gatherers
 And all the busy lives we see
 Fur and feathers, the large and small
 With nature's plenty for us all

 For food is life and life is still
 The old carnage and all must kill
 Others, though why wise nature planned
 The red rapine, who can understand
 Only for food never for sport
 The new evil the white man brought. ("The Food Gatherers")

Modern man's accountability to the environment's present condition is vividly portrayed in these lines. This does not mean that the people who lived according to the primal tradition left nature undisturbed. They had visible effect on the environment. The kangaroos in aboriginal Australia were very swift and wary because the skilled hunters killed the slower ones. The aboriginal Australians introduced the dingo which became the feral and it competed with the native predators like the Tasmanian devil. But as Donald Hughes notes the Australian aborigines devised systems of taboo, forbidding certain foods to certain people as a method of control. Now as the noted Malayalam poet Satchidanandan who was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize notes : One who prays without humility is man/ One who consumes without love is man/ One who kills not for eating is man. This is a sketch of the contaminated community called man. The shift in the life of man is portrayed by Noonuccal in "The Food Gatherers"

The food gatherers busy and gay
 Most of all we love our own
 When as the dulled sun goes down
 Fishers and hunters return home
 To where the family fires burn
 Food now and merriment
 Bellies full and all content
 Around the fires at wide night fall
 This the happiest time of all. ("The Food Gatherers")

This is a substratum for all later stages and still lies importantly below the civilized veneer of modern societies. Elsewhere Noonuccal states:

We belong here we are of the old ways
 We are the coroboree and the boraground
 We are the old sacred ceremonies
 The laws of the elders
 We are the wonder tales of Dream Time
 The tribal legends told
 We are the past, the hunts and the laughing
 Games

 We are nature and the past, all the old ways
 Gone now and scattered (“We are Going”)

The contaminations of the aboriginal communities have resulted in them being dispossessed, gone and scattered.

Modern technological civilization and the poverty, violence and brutality ensuing from it are decried through the speakers of Joy Harjo’s poems. This contamination of community is vividly explained in:

Grandmother, folded up smelling like 200years
 Of blood and piss, her eyes closed against some
 Unimagined darkness, where she is buried in an ache
 In which nothing makes sense (She had Some Horses 14)

The consequences of attempting to tame that which should remain wild and free is seen in the domestication of communities and their destruction as in the case of the Australian Aborigines. They desperately struggle to escape their addictive conditions. It is similar to what Harjo says: “You have paid the cover charge thousands of times over/ with your lives / and now you are afraid you can never get out (She Had Some Horses 21). Modern civilization is as looked upon as the culprit that severed native people from their cultures, world views and relationships.

US Poet Laureate W.S Merwin’s poems are often looked upon as an attempt to refresh perceptions and reconnect to a place. Merwin’s *The Rain in the Trees* turns out to be poetical manifestation of the geography of the Hawaiian Islands. Life is believed to have originated in the Hawaiian Islands through “3 W’s”- wind, waves and wings. The Hawaiian Islands turned out to be a paradise on earth with a wide range of flora and fauna. The degradation of the biodiversity began with the coming of the Polynesians. The arrival of Captain James Cook in

1778 quickened the extinction of native species as European and American entrepreneurs came and left robbing Hawaiians of their cultural dignity. Observations of the changes in lifestyle and places of these people earned for Merwin poetic immortality. It is a voice of protest against money driven technological society to destroy a unique place and its natives. He believes that Hawaiian native culture is downgraded and kept in pockets on the island. The loss of their language is an indication of the loss of their culture. In "Losing a Language" Merwin laments:

Somebody has persuaded them to say things differently
So that they can be admired somewhere
Farther and farther away
Where nothing that is here is known (The Rain in the Trees 67)

The age of technological sophistication has thus promoted a new genre which may aptly be termed "toxic discourses." They reveal not only the degrading of communities but also of the environment. A.R Ammons' 1993 National Book Award- winning poem *Garbage* is the poem of this century. Poetry has been effective in creating what some environmental anthropologists call "disaster sub cultures" which reshape communities through a recollection of or anticipation of environmental disaster. Ammons even visualizes contaminated communities being united through the crises working together for a better community to live in:

Toxic waste, poison air, beach goo, eroded
Roads draw nations together, whereas magnanimous
Platitude and sweet semblance ease each nation
Back into its comfort or despair: global crises
Promote internationalist gettings together,
Problems the best procedure (24).

Even today knowledge of the loss of biodiversity is only fragmentary. In recent years this has escalated a relatively new debate over globalization and its consequences in the socio-environmental scenario though the phenomenon has a history which is more than six hundred years old. The transformation of natural landscapes to managed landscapes which were resisted by the natives were suppressed mainly by pacification campaigns and slaughter of many tribal people but nevertheless attempts to claim their land such as Papa Isio's revolt has now increased its magnitude with communities and countries joining together to save the dispossessed and the contaminated.

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