

A KALEIDOSCOPIC STUDY ON THE POSTCOLONIAL ISSUES IN JUDITH WRIGHT'S SELECT POEMS

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ABSTRACT

In the literary world the poet, Judith Wright is widely known as a renowned Australian poet, critic, environmental activist and crusader for Aborigines, the natives of Australians. She has authored numerous poetry collections. Among them the following considered to be her noted for love of writing poems (The Moving Image, Woman to Man, The Gateway, The Two Fires, Birds, The Other Half, Magpies, Shadow, Hunting Snake). Besides such writings, she is also celebrated for her short story collections. Most of the research on her works, especially on poetry discovers that she has strong concerns for the Australian environment, through which she portrayed the exploits of the colonizers and the World War II. In general, her themes mostly revolve around the issues and conflicts that emerged between the settlers and the indigenous Australians. Her prime focus mainly centres on the inevitable romantic love and relationship between man and the nature, which she views as the main source of inspiration for her poetic creation. The symbols and imagery used by Wright to depict the scenic beauty of the Australian landscapes resemble the Eden Garden in Paradise Lost. With a remarkable imagination and vivid portrayal, her poetry is filled with underlying sufferings, struggles, pathos and sorrows of the native voices. Hence, this paper is aimed at tracing the postcolonial ideas in the select poems of Wright viz., '*The Nigger's Leap, New England*' and '*Bora Ring*'.

Keywords: *Aborigines, Exploitation, Nature, Pathos, Sufferings, Symbols, Imagery, Post-colonialism*

First time, the poem "*Nigger's Leap, New England*" appeared in her first collection of poetry "*The Moving Image*" (1946). Actually, Australia experienced its first European invasion by the Dutch and Spanish in the early 17th century and later by the British in the late 18th century. The particular poem vividly describes the arrival of the white colonizers to the Australian shores and the forced suicides of the native Aborigines. In the beginning of the poem, the description of the serene Australian landscape with its beautiful cliffs, clouds, beaches and rocks in the seashore explains the beauty of nature and the importance of its preservation. The following description clearly takes everyone to nature particularly during the time of dusk and the fast sun setting. Judith writes-

"The eastward spurs tip backward from the sun.

Nights runs an obscure tide round cape and bay

and beats with boats of cloud up from the sea

against this sheer and limelit granite head."

In the poem, the very title seems to a parody to the famous line uttered by Neil Armstrong, the American astronaut and the first man who walked on the Moon in 1969, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.". This line is often quoted with pride that humans have conquered space and we too also feel proud that we were able to land and walk on Moon. But in the poem, the leap refers to an entirely different kind of leap, i.e., the native Aborigines were forced to jump off a cliff and commit suicide. The second half of the title 'New England' clearly indicates the mission of the white colonizers as they intended to create a New England in a foreign continent, Australia. They ultimately wanted to convert Australia into an English colony. The image of the setting sun and darkness in the first two lines suggest not only the end of the day but also the end of the freedom and happiness of the natives. The white colonizers arrived in their ships without any forewarning. The image of the dark clouds forewarns that something evil is going to happen, as it is used to indicate the arrival of the English forces. The poet uses beautiful imagery to compare the Australian landscape to a human body as she says,

...Swallow the spine of range; be dark. O lonely air.

Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull

that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff

and then were silent, waiting for the flies.

In the poem the particular phrase 'spine being swallowed' beautifully symbolizes the enslavement of the natives and they were further thrown to live without basic rights to voice their feelings. Even the air felt helpless and remained a silent witness as she says 'lonely air' which provides a quilt for the dead bodies of the natives who were made to jump off the cliffs. The screams arose not only from the mouths but also from the broken bones and skulls dashing in the rocks. These images portray the horror and pain of the innocent victims. Their bodies were left on the shore unattended and they were waiting for flies to feed on them. The beautiful Australian landscape at night was contrasted with horrors of mass killings. Nature was left as a silent witness to all these incidents.

And then, in the second stanza, the pathos and horror increase as the arrival of the colonizers happened without any warning and the ensuing tortures the natives had to endure. Judith Wright clearly portrays that the natives had to measure days by nights as they were imprisoned as slaves and their lands were measured by their poles suggest the loss of lands. All the voices of the natives were silenced and the very concept of home became

meaningless for them. Even the so-called love was measured by its end and there was no peace in their lives. As Wright says, it all ended up as an ugly and crude synthesis which is highlighted in the following lines.

*...Here is the symbol, and climbing dark
a time for synthesis. Night buoys no warning
over the rocks that wait our keels; no bells
sound for the mariners. Now must we measure
our days by nights, our tropics by their poles,
love by its end and all our speech by silence.*

Later, in their very same native lands they were made to be shelter less and all the meanings for the conventional terms like 'days, tropics, love, speech and home' had been reversed drastically. Then and there the poet raises a poignant rhetorical question that the natives were very much aware that their rivers were channelled only by their blood and the black dust was nothing but their ashes.

*Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?
O all men are one man at last. We should have known
the night that tidied up the cliffs and hid them
had the same question on its tongue for us.
And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange.*

Surprisingly the poet could not understand the reason for the colonizers' enmity or hatred towards the natives while they were all treated as "All men are one man at last". The words 'at last' also hints that both the colonizers and the colonized have to die one day or the other and no one can escape from death. The poet further increases the pathos that the natives were not even aware of the oncoming horror of that night the colonizers killed the natives.

*Never from earth again the cool Amon
or thin black children dancing like the shadows
of saplings in the wind. Night lips the harsh
scarp of the tableland and cools its granite.
Night floods us suddenly as history*

Unlike the ending of other poems, the poem ends with a positive note and a warning to the colonizers as Wright says a comparison that the natives can never be separated from their homelands as shadows cannot be separated from the real images. The shadows are like young kids those who run freely on the shores and they are compared to saplings which spread hope among the livings. The past analysis expresses that History has sunk many islands but it can never be totally wiped out. The only thing they need to be afraid is the night. However, they could overcome all the issues and sufferings and life will go on. Even the sufferings will change everything swiftly. That's why the poet Wright says that history and time have the power to sink any island and even England is no exception to that. So, it is reminded of that Nature conquers all.

And then, commenting on the theme and imagery, "This is the voice of someone describing country with which they are well-acquainted. The range is equated with a human body, its spine stretching in outline against the clouds. The geological past is evident, in the "spurs tip backward from the sun", providing a visual image for the reader of a great outcrop thrust up in a prehistoric volcanic eruption, but still, somehow, moving away from light. It is a dark place then, not a surprising setting for the murderous events described later in the poem. Oddly enough, many contemporary critics persisted in describing the event outlined in the poem as "suicide" (Brissenden, in Thomson, 1968: 43)

Judith Wright's next poem 'Bora Ring', also appeared in the same collection "The Moving Image". Even in this poem, "Bora Ring" Wright vividly portrays the sufferings, pathos and pangs faced by the native Aborigines who never ever thought of it. So, the poet describes as

*The song is gone; the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale.*

She describes through her poem that the natives had lost not only their happiness but also their peace as they were enslaved by the whites. The whites made them to forget their routine songs and dances including rituals and rites. Because of their invasion, they had forgotten their songs and dances as their very existence had become a huge challenge. This affected again their young children who dreamt of enjoying their childhood days. Finally, they had also forgotten their native rituals and stories as they were compelled to listen to alien stories told by the whites. Having this good opportunity, the white colonizers had not only destroyed the lands and the lives of the people but also their language, culture and tradition. Further, the colonizers started spoiling the lands of the natives with their foreign crops and other alien cultivation methods. As a result, only grass was able to grow as the lands had become a total barren land.

The poet in this poem portrays that the "Bora" rings are usually a complex of two or three earthen rings linked by a path or paths. Generally, they were vastly used by the natives particularly in "Man-making" ceremonies. Among the rings, the large ring found in the complex was usually displayed in a public ceremony, facilitating women to look on them. However, the smaller ring was the site of the major initiation ritual for initiated man.

The purpose of the third ring was suggested for women. Bora sites were often associated with carved trees. The average size of a large ring is about 25-30m across, and a small ring 10-12m. The earth is mounded up to a height of 25-50cms. Usually there is a path, often to the southwest from the large ring, connecting the small ring. Therefore, the poem clearly depicts the picture of the Bora ring now lying alone in the landscape. Keeping all these in her mind, the poet informs that 'The apple gums miming a past corroborate' symbolizes the loss of tradition and what was murmured is only a broken chant instead of a vibrant chant. To expose this, the poet says,

*Only the grass stands up
to mark the dancing-ring; the apple-gums
posture and mime a past corroboree,
murmur a broken chant.*

*The hunter is gone; the spear
is splintered underground; the painted bodies
a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot.*

The nomad feet are still.

Later, the colonizers might have gone and left the colonized lands but the damages they had caused were still deep-rooted like spears splintered in the underground. The adult men and women and their children still have fear about them as they ruined almost all their emotional feelings. That is why, the nomads still could not come out of the shock which they faced by the whites and they had almost forgotten their rituals and dance movements. Now they are totally blind and unable to think about their future. Here, Wright says,

*Only the rider's heart
halts at a sightless shadow, an unsaid word
that fastens in the blood of the ancient curse,
the fear as old as Cain.*

Though the white people left their place long ago, still the memories of the colonizers stayed in the minds of the colonized who lament even now. As Nela Bureu comments on, "This feeling of guilt underlies "Bora Ring" where the memory of the Aboriginal tribes forced out of their lands pervades the verses. The poet through her writings wants to recreate or rebuild the setting, brings the local colour into focus and draws our attention to the deserted tribal territories with ghostly dances and echoes of ritual chants". Therefore, the Biblical allusion intensifies the guilt. The plea for humane relationship underlies this poem, for although the tone is highly accusatory, the final lines also insist and imply that the urgent lesson to be learnt by the Aboriginal tribes is the final unity of mankind which is very much needed hereafter.

Therefore, to sum up, the analysis of these two poems in this paper deeply explicate the pain pathos and sufferings of the native Aborigines. Still the poet, Wright did not end the poems pessimistically as she had sown the seeds of hope that the native people would eventually recover from the shocks of colonization. It is estimated that Judith Wright's poetry has created a segment of investigation into the alterations that Australian poetry has consistently recorded. Like Judith Wright, many Australian writers have realistically depicted the physical and psychological invasion of Aboriginal Australia. Another critic has also pointed out as, "Wright's poems acknowledge that the indigenous people of Australia did not simply "pass", but that a violent dispossession did occur, and that responsibility for that dispossession rests also with current generations. Really, this is a vital distinction to be made between Wright and her generation of Australians (and later generations) which preferred, even when writing Aboriginal verse, to convey the impression that the indigenous peoples had somehow mystically vanished." Judith Wright has succinctly transformed the themes of invasion and violation in environmental and humanistic terms. She has also clearly presented symbolic expiation as deep rooted in the sands of time and in nature. As a critic has rightly pointed out, "Love and fear often come together in Wright's poetry. This is especially evident when she engages with the issue of European 'invasion': "I know that we are justified only by love, but oppressed by arrogant guilt, have room for none."

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