

Voice of the Marginalized Through Nature- A Study with Reference to Derek Walcott's "Ruins of a Great House"

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Abstract - War and nature are inevitably interlinked with one another. Sir Derek Alton Walcott is a famous post-colonial poet and playwright whose writings are more about war and colonization. "Ruins of a Great House" is one of his famous poems. It is written in 1956 and it depicts the after-effects of war. As an African writer, he has to struggle with versifying in English, a language that made most of his people suffer. This poem has a deep connection with nature. This stands as a canyon between the pre and post-colonial atmosphere of the Nation. Nature's tragic degradation after the human intervention is depicted with pain in this poem. The voice of the marginalized is conveyed through nature and its constituents. The agony of the people is expressed in accordance with nature. Derek Walcott uses lime as a metonym for colonizers and colonization. The lime that is a part of nature is used to express the voice of the marginalized to the whole wide world which is unaware of the darker side of colonization and the after-effects of colonization. Though this poem stands as a voice of the marginalized, it also explains the degradation of nature after the intervention of man as an authoritarian power. Nature is the ultimate power that is suppressed by the selfishness of the human race. However bad the human community maybe, nature interlinks itself with the human race to speak out for their sufferings and pains.

Index Terms - Nature, marginalization, colonization, war, human.

INTRODUCTION

Derek Walcott is one of the most famous post-colonial poets. His writings explain his discontent with colonization and the colonizers. In the poem "Ruins of a Great house" he depicts the sufferings of the natives under and after the intervention of colonizers. Though his works focus mainly on colonization; it explains the degradation of nature too. In this poem, he explains the degradation of both nature and the natives. The two major degradations are caused by only one factor: "*the authoritarian human power*". The British annihilated the natives by their authoritarian power like a human

does for nature. Nature is used as a tool to speak out for the marginalized. Though nature has also been wrecked by the human race, it is used as a voice of the marginalized. Colonization not only affected the human race but also entangled nature into degradation. This poem is more about colonization and its after-effects but it also has the pain of the degraded Nation as well as Nature.

During the 1800s slavery is the most threatening disease of the Caribbean islands. Derek Walcott writes this poem from the perspective of the people of that time. However slavery has been abolished, the scars it left remain fresh and painful. He uses gloomy imagery and irregular rhyme scheme to depict the cruelty of slavery. The language is irregular and has many allusions throughout the poem which is used to explain the harsh effects of slavery in the Caribbean during his period.

"Ruins of a Great House" is about the poet's intrusion into a lonely deserted house that once was glorious. The house is situated beside a lake and is now deserted and dejected. The poem starts with an allusion to Thomas Browne's "Urn Burial". It explains the burial customs of ancient people and people of his era. The most famous part is the apotheosis of the fifth chapter. Browne says, "But man is a Noble Animal, splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave, solemnizing Nativities and Deaths with equal luster, nor omitting Ceremonies of bravery, in the infamy of his nature". Derek Walcott has comprised his lines to elucidate that the entire toil human put, results in death. Whatever a human does lead him to death but it is the individual who chooses whether it is for good or not. The very first allusion shows the pain in the thoughts of the poet who is traveling into the great house as a Native with the horrible traces of colonization.

The poet uses the word "disjecta membra" to explain the current state of the Great house. 'Disjecta membra' means scattered fragments. Horace has first used this

word and it is derived from *disiecti membra poetae*. It explains that now the great house is nothing but the fragments of the past. Derek compares the girls who lived in the great house to 'moths'. Moths are nocturnal creatures and they symbolize determination, attraction, psychic abilities, and faith. By comparing girls to moths, Derek glorifies the greatness of the Native girls. He then says that they are now mixed with candle dust. Candle dust is the residue of the candle when it is completely used which can no longer be used. He compares it to the girls who have lost all their glory and had been ruined to the fullest and are useless now. He further states that the remains of the great house are used only by the lizards to file their "dragonish claws". The entire building is useless and it has lost its glory.

Then Derek moves on to explain the gates of the great house. He says that the gates now shriek with stain. The Cherubs are baby angels who attend the God directly. Their shriek represents the intensity of the pain. The stains in the gate represent both rust and blood. Rust is because of abandonment and blood is because of slavery. The great house is not only abandoned but also left with horrible memories of the past. Then he speaks that the axle and coach wheels are blocked under the dirt of cattle droppings. The poet indicates that the Nation is stuck under British rule just like the axle and coach. The coach and axle which are meant to be in the movement are now immobile by the cattle droppings. The growth and movement of the Nation are made sterile by the colonizers. Derek uses various images from nature to symbolize the intensity of slavery and the pain it had left. He further gives the imagery of three crows flapping and settling in the eucalyptus boughs which creates a creaking sound. Eucalyptus symbolizes strength and prosperity but in this poem, the tree is pictured as fragile as it creates a creaking sound when the crows settle down in their boughs.

The dead lime creates a stench that quickens in the nose. Limes are not the native plants of the Caribbean islands. The colonizers have planted them to earn profit and to fight scurvy. Scurvy is a disease that loses the system and in extreme cases leads to death. The colonizers have made the plants grow in the Caribbean islands. Plantations gave them profit but the nation is deprived of its natural trees. They used the natives as slaves to grow lime. He calls it the leprosy of the empire. Leprosy is yet another deadly disease that

causes disfigurement and deformities. Like leprosy, the nation has been disfigured by the colonizers. The colonizers have imposed their desires to earn profit and it has made the Nation infertile. The lime that made one country free from disease made the other country disfigured. Leprosy is contagious so the people of other nations fear to help them. This shows the intensity of slavery and colonization.

Derek then uses William Blake's "Night" as an allusion. He uses this allusion to bid farewell to the green fields and happy groves. Because of the lime plantation, the land has become infertile and there are no more fields or groves. There is only lime plantation everywhere. No native trees can be grown anymore because the lime plantation has made the land infertile. This shows not only the degradation of the natives but also Nature because of humans with authoritarian power. The extinction of native trees causes an imbalance in the ecosystem. The natives have lost their originality just like the extinct trees. He then says deciduous trees are no more. Deciduous trees are trees that shed their leaves annually. These trees shed their leaves annually but the leaves grow after a certain period. But now the trees are no more and are gone. This shows the imbalance in the ecosystem. Caribbean islands are detached from their native trees. This is similar to their situation from being detached from their own cultures and traditions and being marginalized by a colonizer. He then brings in marble of Greece and Faulkner's South. Faulkner is known for his love-hate relationship with the South. Though he wrote much of South he has some hatred towards it too. This can be compared with the narrator who has the same feelings towards his Nation.

Derek Walcott says that the lawn breaks into a rash of trees. This denotes that the lawns are not grouped properly and many dead leaves are lying on the ground. This shows that the people have no time to look over their lawn as they are busy as slaves in growing up the lime plantation of the British people. The rash of trees explains how the people are made to work as slaves. Without considering them as a human beings the colonizers have made them work hard beyond their strength. He then brings a spade into the imagery. He says that when someone tries to clean the lawns using a spade they are witnessed to bones of dead animals or even humans. This shows the cruelty of slavery. The lawn has become a place of burial. He

then quotes “Fallen from evil days, from evil times” from Milton’s “Paradise Lost”.

Derek then gives the picture of a river. In the river skirt, lime is grown and is deposited on the fine sand by the river and chokes the river from flowing. He says that it seems that the original crops are lime. The lime has overtaken the original crops of the nation. Everything seems to belong to the colonizers. He uses lime as a metonym for colonizers. It depicts that the Natives no longer feel that they are natives. They feel isolated from their land. The colonizers have made the island look more of their own than of the Natives. The lime plantation is seemed to be native crops. This leads to the extinction of the native crops. The native crops are no longer grown. The natives are forced to grow limes. Through lime, Derek has brought out the imbalance caused by colonization. Nature has become the voice of the marginalized in expressing the intensity of pain caused by the colonizers.

Derek then compares river flow to the freedom they have received. He says that the arrogant people have left the Nation and the river of freedom flows wiping out the hurt and pain. The flow of the river expresses the thoughts of the Natives. They no more feel hatred towards the colonizers. After the colonizers have left them, they forgot everything they did with the flow of freedom. Then the narrator has become a person and climbed the wall which once was used to protect the craftsmen who lived there. He feels that the craftsmen led a luxurious life while all the other Natives are suffering. They lived in a false sense of protection but they are not secure. Now they have become useless and worms and mice started moving in. They have taken over the place.

The repetition of limes brings the intensity back again. The wind that blows in the lime plantation reminds the narrator of the death rattle. He thinks of the past and feels the pain of them. Then he talks about Kipling who is known as the poet of the empire. Being an imperialist he made the slave trade popular. He describes how Bible and sword are used in their favor by using the ignorance of the people. He then moves on to a green lawn where he thinks of the people who started the slave trade. Hawkins, Drake, and Raleigh are indulged in the slave trade. The poet brings them in, to express how a Nation could produce both criminals and well-learned men at the same time. He also feels that he has got to speak about slavery only in the English language. The lime and river pictured

here explain the pain and sufferings the slaves underwent and nature has become a medium of expressing the voice of the suppressed. Like the degradation of the nature around the great house, the colonizers have degraded most of the land as well as the Natives.

Once again lime is brought in to express the intensity of the sufferings the Natives underwent. The stench of the lime takes him back to the past where the Natives were sold as slaves and he thinks of the colonizers, their ships, and the arrest and death warrants they have imposed on the slaves. He says that men may come and go but the pain they give remains forever. Like a lime that got rot, the pain the colonizers gave remains with the Natives. Then he speaks of wind. The wind makes the ashes disappear but the ember is still alive. This explains that the colonizers have left the place but the pain they caused is still fresh and alive in the mind. The memories have made the narrator angry. With rage, he thinks about the past of the colonizers, the British. They are also once colonized by Romans. His anger has been reconciled with the fact that the *Albion*, British was also once a colony. Then he concludes that there is no place for forgiveness but there is understanding. He concludes based on Donne’s words that no man is an island. Every man’s death affects each other. Everybody is knowingly or unknowingly interlinked with each other. Every individual’s death affects the remaining. The cruelty of the past is faced and the plight is noted down in some books. Yet the sufferings of the people remain in the memories. There is no escape from the memories. The nation is filled with memories of the past. The colonizers have left a nonerasable trace on the land. The land sings of the British not of the Natives because the colonizers have left their trace deep.

It can be concluded that Derek has employed nature in bringing out the intensity of the pain and sufferings of the people who were enslaved. There is no place for forgiveness for the degradation of the Nation but there is certainly a tone of compassion. The poem makes the reader think about the history, the pain, and the sufferings of the people of the past. Derek uses nature as a tool not only to express the intensity of the pain but also to remind the people that nature itself is degrading by the selfishness of some people. He compares various elements of nature to bring out the injustice that had happened to the Natives during colonization. Nature acts as the voice of the

marginalized in the poem but now it has become marginalized by the selfishness of individuals. Nature is to be preserved and celebrated rather than exploited and using it for one man's sake.

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