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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Aborigine-Australian Voice: Reading the Poetry of Henry Kendall as a Colonial Text

Ananya Mukherjee

Former Student,
Department of English,
University of Kalyani.

“...the feeling that a new definition of self- metaphysical, historical, cultural, linguistic and social – was needed, was, and is, overwhelmingly persuasive.” - (Alan Lawson, 167)

Henry Kendall is considered as one of the major colonial poets of Australia because of his authentic and distinctive “Australian voice”. Kendall’s poetic personality presents him as an impressionistic emotional observer. His poetry gives emphasis on the Nationalistic approach in order to create an identity of the Aborigines. In Australia the sense of “Australianness” is a crucial one; this national identity is to be created by the writers especially the poets through writing. As G. A. Wilks has conceptualized that, the cultural development of Australia has normally been identified in terms of an “emergent nationalism”. Kendall’s poetry presents the aboriginal perspective of living life. In most of his writings Kendall is concerned about the loss of aboriginal culture and history. My purpose in this paper is to bring out with reference, some major elements that are being adopted by Kendall to consolidate the Aborigine-Australian identity in his poetry.

Australia is a country enriched with a rich cultural tradition. The Aborigines are the original inhabitants of the land. According to the “Aboriginal Myth”, the Aborigines are living in Australia for almost 50,000 years. They had almost 250 kinds of language of their own. This “Aboriginal Myth” believes in the presence of a pervading spirit in the timeless, magical realm of dreamtime. It is to be said that this spirit ancestors continued to connect natural phenomena with the past, present and future through the aspect of Aboriginal culture.

In the year 1788, Australia was first invaded by the white colonial settlers and became the penal colony of British colonial empire. They started the exploitation over the Aborigines; the women were sexually harassed and the men were flogged brutally, the children were taken away from the lap of the mothers and forced into slavery. The condition became more pathetic when these Aborigines were replaced by the new settlement. Aboriginal culture was affected fatally because of this colonization.

Culture is a continuous process of modification. Aborigine-Australian culture also bears the same traits of modification. As Mudrooroo in “White forms and Aboriginal Content”, has aptly stated that,

“For better or worse, ninety- nine percent of Australian culture is of European derivation. Aboriginal culture (or cultures) alone is (are) indigenous and rooted in the soil. They, like every other culture on the globe, are subject to change and are changing continuously.”
(Mudrooroo)

Written from the Aborigine’s perspective Kendall’s poems are meant to invoke the responses of the white Australian poets to their land. Hodge and Mishra aptly pointed out that the white representation of the Aboriginal people coincides with an ultimate discursive regime of sustaining the “Foundation Myth”.

“I know some gentle spirit lives,
Some loving, lonely spirit lives,
Some melancholy spirit lives,
Walking o’er the earth for me’
Searching round the world for me!”

(Henry Kendall, *Waiting and Wishing*, 30).

This poem, “Waiting and Wishing” taken from his first collection of poetry, “Poems and Songs” (1863), is dealing with the “Aboriginal Myth” of eternal spirit. This spirit is voicing the Aborigine-Australian silence. This poem is concerned about the fact that this waiting is for their established existence and their wish is to have a discourse of their own aboriginal culture. Here the existence of a spirit is imagined that would enable them to voice their own feelings. The above quoted lines are giving reference of “searching round a world for me!” This search is meant for a world of Aborigines. The ‘world’ that is able to identify their own existence. The ‘world’ that is being created here has a sense of “Aboriginal Otherness”, a land, continuously struggling to achieve the “Aboriginal Discourse”.

In “The Fate of the Explorers” quoted from the same volume of poetry collection “poems and songs” (1862), there is the longing for ‘past’ memories sets the melancholic tone. These memories are associated with glorified activities not with slavery. The freedom for once own expression was there. Gradually increasing torture makes them tormented and the burden of slavery restrict their movement. “Where in utter silence ever Time seems slowly breathing past-” there is a continuous outburst of emotions that connects the past with present and future. The patriotic fervor is running as vein of this colonial poetry. The “goal” conceived by the poet is the ideological representation of forming the National integration that is developing gradually in the womb of ‘mother’ Australia. The Nation imagined by the poet here is a text of glorious sacrifice; involved in creating the “aboriginal space”.

“For the people’s voice shall echo through the wailings of your lyre;

And we'll welcome back their comrade, though our eyes with tears be blind
At the thoughts of promise perished, and the shadow left behind;"

(Henry Kendall, The Fate of the Explorers, 50)

In 1869, Kendall's second collection of poetry was published in Melbourne under the title, "Leaves from Australian forests". The title itself suggests its relativity with romanticism. The white settlement in Australia was coincided with the Romantic Movement in Europe, so quite spontaneously the Romantic ideology finds its entity deeply rooted in the realm of Australian poetry. The Romantic urge for looking back can be observed very clearly in the poetry of Henry Kendall. Kendall's poetry has a tendency to sympathize with the past condition of the Aborigines in the midst of nature. Therefore, the relationship of Australia with Romanticism partially leads to the emergence of colonialism as this trait of Romanticism has its origin in British colonial empire. Australia's literary tradition is coincided with some oppositional ideology for being a colonized country. This conflict between Australian culture and European culture actually broadens up the scope to introduce Romanticism to the colonial aesthetics.

The Romantic elements found in the Australian poetry connect each other with a sense of oneness. In Eliza Hamilton Dunlop's, "The Aboriginal Mother" has a relationship with nature but deeply implicated with the political connection where nature is overshadowed with this. This poem projects a mother figure that articulates the Mother Nature as a protective lover of her child. This child is associated with the Aborigines. In Kendall's poem we have the "mother" figure who is conscious of her children.

"To watch, like a mourner, for him –

Like a mother and mourner for him."

- (Henry Kendall. The Last of His Tribe, 96)

This "mother" figure has a close association with the National identity that is culturally constructed through politics of language. As observed by John Plamenatz, "Nationalism is primarily a cultural phenomenon, though it can and often does, take a political form." Patriarchy is deeply involved in controlling the patriarchal norms that the idea of 'motherhood' becomes an ideology of great importance. In colonial India the concept of motherhood presents the national integrity. According to the 'masculine' occident the orient is to be conceived as a feminine 'mother' figure. The Nationalists, therefore, ironically identifies their own country with the 'great mother figure'. In India the Nationalist identity is created from the urge to protect their mother from any external and internal destructive power. For the Nationalists this is a way of protecting their cultural identity as "Indian". Therefore, "Nationalism" can properly be understood as a

“desire to preserve or enhance a people’s national or cultural identity when that identity is threatened, or the desire to transform or even create it where it is felt to be inadequate or lacking.”
(Plamenatz, 23-4).

In Kendall’s poetry the national identity is created through the cultural history of Australian Aborigines. Australian culture is basically European derivation; only the Aboriginal culture is deeply rooted into the soil of Australia. If we consider it in the colonial context then we realize the threat imposed upon the aboriginal culture by the colonial empire. This exploitation gives birth to the establishment of a unified “Aborigine-Australian voice” by forming a sense of Nationalism. In Henry Kendall’s poetry the urge for the cultivation of colonial literature is echoed when he exclaims,

“we have men amongst us who can and have done something racy of the soil, who are willing to continue their efforts in the domain of polite letters, and who are only waiting for some assurance that the Australian public appreciate those efforts.” (Kendall, 327)

Australian poetry portrays the “mother” figure that is associated with the “Nation” Australia. With the white settlers the land is usurped, therefore, the mother figure is also usurped by them. Australia is called a new land by the British colonial empire, but in reality it has a long cultural tradition. In colonial aspect when a land is called a new one then it is to be considered that the land is prepared for a new history; that is to be inscribed by the settlers through erasing out the aborigine’s own cultural and social history.

“They call her a new country, but they lie:

She is the last of lands, the emptiest,

A woman beyond her change of life, a breast

Still tender but within the womb is dry.”

(A.D.Hope, Australia)

Kendall is very much sympathetic with the aboriginal loss of inheritance. His poem “The Last of His Tribe” is endowed with the feelings of pain, suffering and loss. The protagonist in this poem is presented as a lonely survivor of his tribe. He is invoking the eternal spirit to provide him the courage to fight with his fate. This man has lost all his tribal relatives and is longing back to those happy days; as an active person when he was accompanied with all his beloved ones. They are no more but their existence can be felt everywhere. The protagonist immediately goes back to the days when they performed their tribal dance of corroboree. Kendall’s vision of a virgin land with un-trodden shores and innocent tribal people anticipates the romanticized notion of the past with the accompaniment of primitive warriors. The war has started but his war has ended literally by losing his forefathers’ tradition. The man is now wondering lonely with a moaning heart.

“He crouches, and buries his face on his knees,
And hides in the dark of his hair;
For he cannot look up to the storm-smitten trees,
Or think of the loneliness there-
Of the loss and loneliness there.”

- (Henry Kendall. The Last of His Tribe, 96)

In this poem Kendall used some words like, “nullah”, “Uloola”, “corroboree”, which have a typical association with the aboriginal culture and language. Kendall, therefore, through this poem tries to present the language of the aboriginal people. The voice uttered here is that of protest and pathos. The longing back towards past is originated from the pre-colonial aspect, where the Aborigines practiced their cultural rituals as their cultural identity was not threatened. But unfortunately the scenario has completely changed with the passing time. Kendall’s poetry brings out that sense of futility in human existence; their continuous struggle for finding existence in the midst of confusion and confirmation. The cry of the protagonist here is the voice of all suffered people. The quest of the aboriginal protagonist to his past revives the sense of Nationalism. There is a continuous conflict in human being and a search for identity. The loss that the man was experiencing is the platform where Kendall’s sympathetic “Australian voice” is grounded.

In one hand this Romantic elements are consolidating the traits of European culture, on the other hand the elements of Romanticism is a cry for “Return to Nature”, which actually concentrates to focus on the aboriginal culture and its people. While talking about Romanticism Paul Kane exclaimed that, “almost the whole of what we associate with the flowering of Romanticism took place while the settlement in Australia struggled to become a self sufficient colony.” (Kane, 9). Therefore, Kendall’s poetry becomes a direct locus of colonial identity. The romantic nature and the gothic elements are present in his poetry but the purpose behind this is to convey the socio-political aspect of Kendall’s contemporary Australia. His pathos is a mode of his personalized version; associated with his own existence as a poet, most importantly an Australian poet, seeking for the real scenario behind the colonized identity. Therefore, we can conclude by saying that Kendall’s poetry bears the traits of colonialism and very idealistically portrays the Nationalist orientation of Aborigine- Australian voice.

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