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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

Ecological Imperialism and its New Face: The Impact of Technology, Capitalism and Colonialism on Postcolonial Ecologies

Rakhi N P

M.Phil Research Scholar
Bharathiar University
Coimbatore-641046

Ecological imperialism is an idea introduced by Alfred Crosby in his seminal work *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* which refers to the efforts of colonialists to introduce their animals, plants and even diseases in the native's land to felicitate their rule. But that concept of Crosby has a renewed interest in postcolonial world especially in light of the growing popularity of capitalism and globalization. Capitalistic and colonialist invasions focus not merely on the subjugation of native but the land in which he lives. This conquest seems to have some ecological aspects. Voluntarily or involuntarily each of these conquests has an adverse impact on the land they conquered. In industrialist and capitalistic societies, such invasions into indigenous communities will result in an erosion of natural resources and deforestation. The new face of ecological imperialism and its impact on postcolonial indigenous communities can be seen in many of the works of postcolonial literature. A focus on Thomas King's *Green Grass Running Water* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* hopes to reveal the complex fabrics of relations between the oppressed land and its inhabitants.

The imposition of a dam and a human-made lake and reservoir on a Blackfoot reserve in the small town of Blossom, Alberta, is a potent symbol in *Green Grass, Running Water* for non-Native oppression of Native Canadians' land rights, traditions and cultural codes. Intrusion of western culture into the lives of natives is shown vividly in many instances of the novel. Dr. Hovaugh observes the changes happening to the garden in front of hospital and laments over the loss of elm trees. Thomas King describes the cutting down of elm trees like this:

“....men in yellow uniforms with their silver and purple chain saws slice each of the elms into short, round blocks and cart them away....New trees, thin and fragile, were brought in to complete the illusion, but the death of the old trees, which were almost as old as the garden itself, left Dr. Hovaugh burdened with inexplicable remorse and guilt.”(77)

The same way Thomas King shows how the introduction of tourism brings much chaos into the serene landscape of Alberta. Charlie's project of constructing a dam and a parliament lake is also a part of government's tourism agendas. Construction of a lake, according to him, will open up new prospects of real estate business and enrich the economy of the country also. Even Bursum, a native himself, is taken away by the false promises of the government and has been one of the first people to buy a lot at Parliament Lake.

Eli and his cabin which is nearest to the dam is the biggest hurdle that the industrialists have to deal with in achieving their goals. In these instances, one can see government machineries acting ruthlessly to capture the lands of natives in the name of development. They will give an impression that they are implementing all these governmental programmes to improve the life of natives. But whatever they construct in Alberta are not Indian in Essence. That's why Hawkeye says: “It (the dam) doesn't look like an Indian dam....It doesn't look like an Indian Lake.”(King 449) Treaties claim that the natives are righteous of their land “as long as the grass is green and the waters run.” But as Thomas King says:

It was a nice phrase, all right. But it didn't mean anything. Eli knew that. Every Indian on the reserve knew that. Treaties were hardly sacred documents. They were contracts, and no one signed a contract for eternity. (296)

Western government doesn't have any concern for the tradition of the natives. For natives, natural course of the waterway is something sacred. Anything, even if it is a dam, that obstructs the water way is objectionable for them. Eli, though he is much accustomed to modern lifestyle, stands as a spokesman of the natives and files a law suit against Charlie's company which constructs this dam.

Ecological conquests of capitalistic and colonialist forces seem to invite a resistance from the part of inhabitants. Quite interestingly, indigenous communities across the world cherish a strong bond with the land they live in. That land becomes a formative part of their personal, mental and physical make up. That itself results in a clash when they are faced with the threat of seizure of their land. This pattern of psychological trauma results in an identity crisis. In *Green Grass Running Water* also, the same pattern of identity crisis can be seen. Water seems to be the centre of the myths of coyote tribe and thus it becomes one of the formative elements of their identity too. Water is the creative force for them and for the Coyote, "In the beginning there was nothing. Just the water. Everywhere you looked, that's where the water was" (King112). Through the analysis of the scenes in which water inexplicably appears in *Green Grass, Running Water*, it becomes possible to establish a consistent link between water and the traumatic experiences of the main characters of the novel.

Water becomes both a tool of resistance and identity formation for the Coyote Tribe. The characters do not initially perceive water as the symbol of life that it should embody according to Native tradition. Instead, water is shown as an obstacle that encourages inaction and stasis. While rain prevents the characters from moving easily outdoors and carrying on their daily activities on several occasions in the novel, the retained water at the dam holds up Bill Bursum's dream cottage project. Similarly, because of the constant menace of the dam, Eli must remain at his cabin to prevent Duplessis from opening the gates. Water, in this sense, keeps the characters isolated from one another and holds back their aspirations. But later on, this very stagnant water seems to transform the lives of natives as it presents before them the options to face difficulties associated with their identity and past.

Water serves as the common element in each character's difficulties with their identity and with their past. Whether it is when Alberta sees her father Amos for the last time, when abusive ex-husband George Morningstar calls Latisha at the restaurant or when Lionel reminisces about his three "mistakes" while driving, pools of water inexplicably appear, creating a common phenomenon that links each of these events together. These accumulations of water are particularly meaningful when considered as miniature replicas of Parliament Lake, a giant pool created by the construction of the hydro-electric dam just outside of Blossom. It serves as a link which connects the exploitation of ancestral land by Duplessis and personal trauma of the individual members.

The destruction of nature by White companies echoes the communal and personal sufferings of the inhabitants of Blossom and its nearby reserve. In making references to pools of water every time a character remembers a traumatic experience, King transforms each of these moments into a symbolic addition to Parliament Lake, whose level rises daily. As the water accumulates in the lake at the same rhythm as trauma in the community, the dam collapses at the same time as the characters begin to relate to one another; the breaking point is reached simultaneously. This linkage provides the native with a solution for their identity crisis. To amend their torn identity, they have to rejuvenate the already diminishing ties with their ancestral land and its tradition.

Almanac of the Dead sheds light, in the words of Lindsey Claire Smith, on a continuing European ‘pattern of terrestrial and ecological conquest’ (152) in the indigenous homelands of the American Southwest, Central America, and the Caribbean Islands. It shows the combined effort of a community to resist the attempts of white government to confiscate their lands and seize their resources. Novel presents before us much of the instances of ecological imperialism as both colonial and capitalistic machineries lay their hands on the serene landscape of Native American settlements.

The characters Leah Blue and Menardo in *Almanac of the Dead* have special roles to play in terms of capitalism and evolution of “whiteness” in the Americas. Leah is an ambitious European land developer who associates herself with Mafia in completing her capitalistic projects. She plans to create a ‘city of the twenty-first century, Venice’ in the desert surrounding Tucson. Because the grand designs call for the construction of artificial waterways and fountains, Leah must obtain approval to divert thousands of gallons of water from deep well aquifers to the proposed gated community. She is having an aversion for the desert ecosystem and devalues it as worthless: “[w]hat possible good was this desert anyway? Full of poisonous snakes, sharp rocks, and cactus!” (Silko 750) This attitude is common to any western industrialist who weighs nature only on the basis of its utility. For implementing her grand project she has to evacuate Indians from their land. Naturally Leah is prompted to exploit her husband’s relationship with the corrupt Judge Arne in order to bypass environmental land use laws. Leah openly acknowledges that she is “in the real estate business to make profits, not to save wildlife or save the desert.” (Silko 375) Such an attitude is never to carry any sympathy for the tribes, to whom nature is the only source of vitality.

Menardo is a hybrid who tries to overcome the trauma of his mixed ancestry by passing himself off as a white man. He marries rich, white, educated women, and entered into the business of the Universal Insurance Company which insures wealthy property owners against natural disasters. However, he also provides his clients with access to a paramilitary organization equipped with arms from Tucson and trained to battle indigenous insurgents determined to reclaim their ancestral lands in Central America. In this context Menardo illustrates the ecologically destructive nature of capitalism. Capitalistic project of evacuating the indigenous lands and using it for industrialist expansion has been instrumentalised through the works of Menardo in this novel. The Universal Insurance Company also enables capitalist dominance over the environment. On a small scale, the furrowed and manicured rows of the coffee plantations will continue to encroach upon the lush, natural foliage of the hillsides that once sheltered the squatters’ villages. This will allow the planters to invest their profits into the much larger area of ‘downtown Mexico City.’ Menardo’s indirect contribution to the preservation and growth of this white land is ‘poison smog’ from traffic in the winter, and the “choking clouds that swirled off sewage treatment leaching fields and filled the sky with fecal dust in early spring.” (Silko 313)

At the heart of Silko’s novel lies the relationship between Sterling, the aging, urbanized, Laguna Pueblo railroad worker recently returned to his ancestral homelands, and Maahastryu, the giant sandstone snake whose reemergence from an abandoned uranium mine on the reservation heralds the return of the tribe’s protector. Sterling’ narrative brings forth the kind of disastrous effects that uranium mines have on the ecology of Tucson. Apprehensions of old tribal people are clear when they cry out to these invaders: “Leave our Mother Earth alone....Otherwise terrible things will happen to us.”(Silko 759) When Sterling sees the “uranium waste blowing in the breeze, carried by the rain to springs and rivers,” (758), the destruction of Tucson is complete in both ecological and cultural sense. At the end of the novel, when Sterling returns to the reservation and visits the stone snake, he realizes the Destroyers are the ones who blast the earth and rip her open to mine for minerals or water. Once they have depleted the supply of these precious items they move on to another

location, with no respect for any of the land or lives they have demolished in their wake. Destroyers can come from any culture but they will not live forever. In the case of the uranium the whites were the Destroyers who had taken from their land, and the “humans had desecrated only themselves with the mine, not the earth. Burned and radioactive, with all humans dead, the earth would still be sacred. Man was too insignificant to desecrate her” (Silko 758)

Industry’s intrusion is not reduced to the natural resources but expands to culture that the tribes possess. Hollywood’s attempts to intrude into the secrets of tribal culture, especially that of the great stone snake, disturb the solemnity of the lives of tribes. Upon his return to Laguna, Sterling is charged with protecting Maahastryu, the stone snake, from a menacing Hollywood production crew filming on the reservation. When he fails to prevent the outsiders from desecrating the snake, the Tribal Council attributes this to his indifference to Laguna epistemologies and banishes him from the tribe indefinitely. Thus Sterling becomes the victim of this cultural hijacking and being banished from the community.

As a result of his boarding school education Sterling ‘had never paid much attention to the old-time ways’ of the Laguna, “because he had always thought the old beliefs were dying out”. (Silko 762) Naturally, Sterling views Maahastryu as part of his nightmare of placelessness, rather than as an integral piece of Laguna epistemology that might ground his identity within the environment of the reservation. As it is not a formative part of the identity, Sterling fails to realize the worth of the great stone snake and kept himself away from that. But later on, Sterling realizes the correlation that he as an individual has with the land that is symbolized through Maahastryu. The answer to Sterling’s survival lies in establishing the value of human accountability to the land – rather than succumbing to the non-Laguna concept of human ownership of the land. Sterling’s ability to foster a reciprocal consciousness begins with his final return home. While tuning over the pages of a magazine which pictures the western world, he finds his past as rootless and insignificant. For him, now, the world outside the reservation is “a world that was gone, that safe old world that had never really existed.”(757) Sterling is now looking upon his relationship with the land in an entirely new way. As Nelson comments, he is not ‘conquering the land or . . . living in spite of it’, as he did in his years with the railroad, but is finding ways – sometimes ‘traditional’, sometimes ‘innovative’, and sometimes a creative blend of the two – to live *with* the land, holding and being held by the life that precedes and survives the life of any individual, as well as the life of any culture.

Looking to the earth for answers, Sterling finds ants carrying underground some of the spilled beans he had cooked. Sterling continues to offer beans to the ants. Although this is a small step for Sterling, the act suggests that he is beginning to shed his passive skin of indifference to Laguna epistemologies by taking an active part in the intermediary role the ants play in connecting him to the earth. Sterling is ‘able to face the future’ because he accepts the snake’s significance as a vital part of the tribe’s survival; this represents an “awareness that is only possible because of his grounding, through ancestral ties, on the earth”. Sterling ‘wasn’t afraid’ of the snake any more.

Sterling like any other native in a postcolonial ecology is puzzled by the breaking down of his ties with his land and environment. Thus when he reclaims his affinity towards land by shedding his indifference to Laguna epistemologies, it becomes the revival of an identity for the native in him. Just as in the case of Thomas King’s *Green Grass Running Water*, myths and mythic figures become instrumental in integrating the severed ties with nature. Here the almanacs of the dead spirits unify the various strands of ecological movements and cultural revivals happening among native communities across the world.

Both these novels portray the destruction happening to nature as widely reflected in individual lives of natives because of their intricate ties with it. The loss of land can be

paralleled with the loss of identity that the native goes through. An analysis of both these novels acquires value as it enquires into the condition of landless natives in a highly commercialized and industrialized society. In an extremely globalised community, these conflicts become severe and unbearable for the native. His efforts to cling on to his native tradition are spoiled and his assimilation with the industrial community becomes problematic. This trauma can be effectively explored in the background of these narratives. Each of these protagonists seems to echo the concerns of a highly industrialized society alienating itself from nature. This plight of natives offers a new dimension to the theory of Crosby, ecological imperialism, which can be used to understand the complex dynamics of ecological invasions by capitalistic and industrial forces in postcolonial world.

Capitalistic and colonialist invasions focus not merely on the subjugation of native but the land in which he lives. This conquest seems to have some ecological aspects. Voluntarily or involuntarily each of these conquests has an adverse impact on the land they conquered. In industrialist and capitalistic societies, such invasions into indigenous communities will result in an erosion of natural resources and deforestation. The degradation that is happening to environment because of these invasions is sure to have an impact on the psyche of the native. This in turn leads to identity crisis which will provoke the native to shed his indifference and react against ecological invasion. Both these novels present before us an interesting variety in the resistance that each protagonist shows against the oppressive agency. Culture and myths becomes the tool of resistance for the natives. Native characters in both *Almanac of the Dead* and *Green Grass Running Water* hold on their culture and traditional knowledge to fight against western invasion. This return to culture is in one way or other the reclamation of affinity to nature.

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