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A Lament on the Loss of Appalachian Values: The Agony of Arthur Ownby in *The Orchard Keeper*

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Abstract:

Appalachian literature, an important genre of the Southern literature, deals mainly with the life and conditions of the area that is, Appalachia. The area occupying the southern mountainous region has often been under consideration due to the various socio-economic issues taking place there. Reformers and policy makers have taken various measures to improve the income, living conditions and the general welfare of the area. These changes, taking place at a rapid rate, resulted in effecting the mindset of a number of people who still cling to the older beliefs. It has created a longing for the past and a quest for the values that have been its significant part. Furthermore, the reformation has resulted in a sort of rebellion for the present conventions as these changes are unacceptable for the people with a primitive instinct. The *Orchard Keeper* evaluates the implications of the incessant changes in Appalachia that have inflicted a strain on Arthur Ownby, the protagonist of the novel, who ends up being an isolationist. This condition is the result of the alienation that has been inflicted upon him due to the rampant changes in the society. He has become spiteful of the ongoing system resulting in the complete rejection of the government authority. The paper deals with the analysis of the circumstances that make Ownby abandon everything and turn him into an isolationist. His quest for the past, malice towards the authorities as well as a desire to submerge into the nature has also been dealt with. A feeling of alienation and marginalisation due to the loss of older values, is also taken into consideration.

Keywords: Appalachia, Isolation, Modernisation, Marginalisation, Quest

The novel *The Orchard Keeper* opens in Eastern Tennessee Circa during 1920's with an account of an unsuccessful attempt by three men to cut an old tree that has grown around a wrought iron fence. The plot of the novel revolves around three main characters of the novel, Arthur Ownby, Marion Sylder and John Wesley. All the three characters are in a way engaged in their own manner of carrying out a living which is quite apart from the rules of the normal society. Arthur Ownby in particular is a character whose way of living is quite distinct from the others. He has created his own world in the far off woods and lives a primitive life there, away from the rest of the so called urbanized world. His living and eating conditions are in no way similar to the modernised world which is proceeding towards development in its routine comings and goings. Ownby's life is in a way fixated in the past

and there seems no way to overcome this fixation. The transformation is unacceptable to him because he finds this alteration to be flawed. The Orchard Keeper gives a meticulous account of the Appalachian landscape, “East of Knoxville, Tennessee the mountains start, small ridges and spines of the folded Appalachians that contort the outgoing roads to their liking. The first of these is Red Mountain; from the crest on a clear day you can see the clear blue line of the watershed like a distant promise” (10).

Southern region is divided into two particular regions: mountain and lowland. Mountaineers are thought to represent a rebellious eccentricity together with severe poverty. The Lowland South is associated with the myth of the plantation, wealth, family and stability with a glorification of the traditions. Much of Southern literature comes from the conflict between the two regions and the atmosphere surrounding each. The Orchard Keeper comes largely under the category of a part of the genre of Southern literature that is Appalachian literature. Cormac McCarthy and William Faulkner are the important writers of this kind of literature. The mountainous region of Appalachia has been considered to have remained culturally isolated and homogeneous. The changes incurring in the Appalachian region have resulted in a lot of discrepancy and a constant flux in the ongoing system. There is, in one way an adherence to the older values and on the other hand an urge for the change. This spar has resulted in forming a secluded group of people who insists on remaining true to the past inclinations. The change towards modernisation, however, kept proceeding and the result was a feeling of strain and abhorrence in the rebel group. The Orchard Keeper is also a typical Appalachian novel with its characters representing the internal conflict between the supporters of modern conventions and the anti-conventional beings. In the article, “Appalachian Culture and Economic Development” the authors maintain:

Although cultural modernization was believed to be key to Appalachia's full participation in mainstream American economic life, modernization--at least in the short run-- was also seen as producing disequilibrium among social institutions as well as psychological strain, frustration, and confusion among individuals, especially the poorly educated and those less able to adapt to changing conditions. Under extreme circumstances of frustration such Appalachians could be expected to retreat further into a protective subculture of resistance, i.e., a subculture of poverty (Lewis).

The glimpses of the background of Ownby's early life, that become apparent through the reminiscences of his past, point out that he himself has been a part of this civilized world in the past. Like the regular inhabitants of the society, he used to have family and live stock to carry on his living. He may have indulged in other agricultural activities to provide for his family and to be at par with the rest of the society. But his present circumstances are quite contrary from what used to be as now he has no family and is dwelling away from the society. There are no signs of modernisation in his living conditions which reflects that he is carrying on his life in an entirely primitive manner. Although he lives distinctively and does not even care for the familial relations, it does not mean that he is lacking compassion. The consideration that he shows for John Wesley and the other boys who visit him in his lodging, depict that he is not sans the basic human touch. In fact, he tends the corpse of an unknown

person which shows that he values humanity and is not an anti-human. Selfless service, dedication to nature as well as preservation of its valuable amenities is of vital concern to him. He is hostile just towards the interference of the modernised world with his self-created primitive one.

As already said, Ownby has been a part of the common society and lived like a common man among the others, engaging in his agricultural feats. No account is provided of how he came to live such kind of life. It can be said that he might have suffered a loss in his agricultural business due the changing technology and it might have created anguish in him against the changing system. This anguish might have resulted in his isolationistic wish and his ultimate seclusion from the society. The new social order is not be acceptable to him and that's why he wishes to go further away from it, "If I was a younger man, he told himself, I would find me a clearwater branch and build me a log house with a fireplace. And my bee would make black honey. And I wouldn't care for no man[...]. Then I wouldn't be unneighborly neither[...]" (59). He prefers nature over human and wishes to live in a complete natural manner without seeking the help of civilization. It also shows that he longs for company but not the artificiality of the present world; he wishes to find it somewhere in the lap of nature.

The conditions that have induced this isolationistic wish in Ownby may be largely the goals and aspirations of the society and the importance attached to particular values and aspirations. The effects of this isolation are not totally negative; there are some positive aspects as well. Ownby is no doubt living apart from the society but this isolation has not taken away the basic human instinct of compassion and love from him. In fact, he adores the nature and the natural surroundings and wants to preserve this heaven of his from the outer interference. He does not want to corrupt the purity of his natural world by the filthiness of the materialistic society. There is quite certainty that he is inflicted with isolation and such isolation is particularly experienced by "those who . . . assign low reward values to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society" (Seeman, 1959, pp. 788–789). Benjamin S. Child in his article, "Looking Over the Country Again: Rusticity and the Urban/Rural Spatiality of The Orchard Keeper and No Country for Old Men" asserts:

In some broader sense, *The Orchard Keeper* is a portrait of a world in flux: set in the moment when the T.V.A. programs of the New Deal were enacting foundational changes in rural mountain life, the novel traces the imposition of a modern world upon the conventions of traditional Appalachia, as well as the more subtle influence of Appalachian culture back upon the city itself.

The vicious husk of the system is personified through the character of Kenneth Rattner who is a materialistic, self-reflexive and an insolent being. He befools people by telling lies and adjusts his behaviour to suit the occasion; portraying himself as a part of the self-seeking society. It is these self-seeking motives that Ownby wishes to keep himself detached from. His wandering in the mountains and the journey across various places represents this quest for a place free from this bureaucratic control. Ownby is a "watcher of seasons and their work" (95) and does not live by the conventional ways of considering time through watches

and calendars. He is often nostalgic about his past life and longs for “the rich earth odors, remembering other springs, other years” (60).

Arthur Ownby also seems to represent this proclivity to the older values and the past time. He wishes to be aloof from the rest of the world and live peacefully in natural environment. He is spiteful of the interference of the outer world and becomes seditious when this world of his is intruded by the foreign one. The novel is in fact a conflict between the opposing forces: past and present; pastoralism and industrialism; and rusticity and urbanity. Ownby finds himself to be a miscast in this rapidly changing world and resolves to remain indifferent to these changes. He moves about on foot across the various landscapes in search of an entirely secluded place in the lap of nature. There he wishes to live an exclusively pastoral life, making his living in a primordial manner. But the inhabitants of the so-called civilized world do not let him inhabit a peaceful life in his paradise. To his utter annoyance, the government water tank is placed in his orchard without his permission and it invokes his extreme wrath. He reciprocates to this interference by firing three crosses into the tank, showing his non-compliance with the authorities. Analysing the Appalachian elements in McCarthy’s novel’s Gerhard Hoffmann writes in his article, “Strangeness, Gaps and Mystery of Life: Cormac McCarthy’s Southern Novels”:

The decisive context of McCarthy's characters is the Appalachian setting, nature and landscape. The author frames the human with the unhuman, and the dialectic between the two determines much of what is related and described in the book that often disperses the logic and coherence of its stories by unprepared shifts of interest from one character and one point of view to the other and from interest in the human lot to that in its setting, in houses and scenery, in streams, animals, the weather - thus decentralizing the narrative and copying therewith the aimless and episodic, irresistible and mysterious nature of life, not the form and organization of human order.

A number of incidents in the novel illustrate the insensitiveness of the reforming trends toward the traditional flock. Ownby has been in a way invisible for the authorities for a long time but his existence becomes concerning to them as soon as he damages the government property. After the incident, he is treated like a hard core terrorist and is searched for vehemently. The callousness of the authorities is visible from the treatment that is meted out to Ownby’s old dog Scott. Ownby is concerned about his dog and wants to take it with him when he is arrested; but the officers who arrest him, react to his concern in a very insensitive manner. They do not give a least consideration to the sentiments of Ownby, thinking of Ownby’s apprehension as mere stupidity. “He can’t shift for himself [...] he’s too old” (217), said Ownby, feeling worried about his dog. The reaction of the officer to Ownby’s anxiety is quite indifferent, “I ain’t no dog catcher and this ain’t no kennel, the man said. And I wadn’t sent here to haul no brokendown sooner around. Now get in the goddammed car and stay put” (217). In fact Ownby’s attachment to his old dog depicts his unwavering connection with the past and the officer’s attitude represents his coldness to this association. The scene where the officials finally arrest Ownby and take him away leaving behind his dog, is really pathetic. Even the reaction of Scott after he is left there alone, is

pitiable, “The old man clutching his cane [...], looked back at the dog still standing there like some atavistic symbol or brute herald of all questions ever passed upon humanity and beyond understanding, until the dog raised his head to clear the folds above his milky eyes and set out behind them at a staggering trot” (217)

Mc Kindery, while analysing the distinct taste in McCarthy’s novels makes the following assertion, “McCarthy juxtaposes descriptions of man's isolation in nature and the notion of the transcendental `self with the equally compelling sense that however much his protagonists display a desire for isolation, a sense of the past, both genealogical and geographical, persists” (5). Mc Kindery further proclaims that the while reading the novel, the reader becomes a spectator to the “cinematographic changes in perspective and point of view” (iii). Gray Richard in his book *Southern Abreptions: Writers of American South and the Problem of Regionalism* analyses the distinction between regionalism and nationalism. He considers the instabilities that occur when a culture begins to perceive itself as marginalised. Gray proposes that “the note of exile sounds like a melancholy bell through Southern writing” (26), and that its “determining features [...] include a compelling inwardness, a stifling sense of claustrophobia, a scarcely concealed hysteria, and the habit of looking backward, not only for comfort but the means of salvation” (32). Ownby is also much inclined towards his own regional traits than the overall transformation of his area. Being an Appalachian character, Ownby’s inclination towards past is therefore obvious. The different borders which exist between feelings of ‘proud isolation’ and ‘cultural inferiority’ as mentioned by Gray, also occurs in McCarthy’s fiction.

After his ultimate arrest, Ownby is put into the prison where he is visited by a social worker. The behaviour of the social agent is no less apathetic. Instead of trying to provide genuine help to Ownby, the agent busies himself by asking inadequate questions about Ownby’s age and address. The agent keeps asking such questions which Ownby answers until he feels nothing is going to come-out of such questioning. Ownby realises that the agent too is a member of this acquisitive society which is concerned more about the possessions than the individuals. He knows that the agent too is just concerned to know the reason behind his damaging the government tank. “Why don’t you say what you came here to say? Why not just up and ast me? [...] Why I done it. Rung shells and shot your hootnanny all to hell?” (233). Ownby’s aggression shows his deep anguish for the coldness of the system. This feeling of marginalisation is deriving him anomic; making the authorities take him into a mental asylum. His distress is quit visible when he tells the agent:

I could tell you why [I shot the tank] – and you stil wouldn’t know. That’s all right. You can set and ast a bunch of idjit questions. But not knowin a thing ain’t never made it not so. Well, I am an old man and I’ve seen some hard times, so I don’t reckon Brushy Mountain ’ll be the worst place I was ever in. (233-34)

This outburst of Ownby provide a sort of indication to what Ownby might have faced to incur such kind of life. The tactics of the society might have been unacceptable to him, leading him to complete isolation. It might have been such conditions that made him leave his family also

and live alone in the company of his dog. The old dog Scott is itself a symbol of the innocence, simplicity and honesty that used to be characteristic of old Appalachia.

The conditions, as mentioned above, have caused such a deep impact on Ownby that he has become somewhat anomic. The comment of the social agent might be right to some extent when he says that Ownby is “Definitely an anomic type” (235). As Emile Durkheim says in his book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* that anomie occurs when there is a sudden social and economic change in the in the society, leading to a particular type of suicide. Ownby’s reaction to the situation is in a way a kind of suicide as is visible from the consequences which he has to face due to his rejection of the change. Ownby’s quest is in a way a search for a place outside the control of such bureaucracy and authority. Such quest is prevalent in the other two characters of the novel also that is Marion Sylder and John Wesley who also do not find the prevailing system worthy enough and want to escape from it. This is clear from the reaction of Sylder who once “turned to the mountain to join what crowds marshalled there beyond the dominion of laws either civil or spiritual” (17).

To bring the discussion to a conclusion, it can be said that *The Orchard Keeper* being an Appalachian novel, deals with the consequences that have been incurred upon the natives due to the changes that have been taking place in that area. The changes being unwelcome to several people, caused a strain in them; resulting in a longing for the past. This longing creates an anomic condition which causes the victim to do some sort of rough activities. Ownby, one of the major characters of the novel is suffering from such a strain leading him to an alienated life in the woods. He discards the changes taking place and is quite opposed to the interference of government authorities. Ownby is a true example of the distortion that occurs to some people of the area where sudden social and economic changes take place. These people can become the victims of alienation, creating an isolationistic wish in them. The consequences of such isolation can be grave sometimes, leading the individual towards a rebellious conduct. The coldness of the authorities to their condition can further aggravate the situation. It’s necessary to take into proper consideration their menace and provide the required remedies. Treating these people as outsiders will intensify their wrath, making them dangerous for the rest of the society. So, a compassionate treatment is necessary to be provided to the victims of this sort of isolation. The conditions that lead to such sort of behaviour in them have to be understood adequately to provide the solution thereof.

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