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Critiquing Colonialism: An Ecocritical Reading of Oodgeroo's *We Are Going*

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Abstract:

The project of colonialism is inseparably associated with the massive destruction of nature and indiscriminate killing or eviction of natives like aboriginals. This paper is intended to analyze these very devastations of colonialism inflicted upon the indigenous aboriginals of Australia who are residing with nature from time immemorial through a few poems of Oodgeroo's *We Are Going*. Oodgeroo, being the first written voice of aboriginals, potently foregrounds the brutal reality of British colonization of Australia. The trails of incessant displacements, harsh treatments, and cultural imposition or baggage in the history of dispossessed aboriginals surface the subterfuge of White Man's Burden of civilizing the blacks. Oodgeroo is a formidable critique of White Man's ways of civilization or exploitation. Unlike the extremist deep ecological attitude, her poems witness that not only nature, but also human like aboriginals are at the verge of getting extinct. They are equally endangered and seek proper attention. One requires being specific about blaming human for damaging nature because these aboriginals are integral part of nature, and they are not supposed to be blamed for using bare minimum from nature.

Keywords: colonialism; aboriginal; eviction; civilization.

I

The depletion of human tribes like Australian aboriginal and the degeneration of natural resources function as a synecdoche for an immensely expansive environmental apocalypse where all life seemed to live in harmony "... with its surroundings and invoking the ancient tradition of the pastoral..." (Carson 21) is demolished and dismantled. The catastrophic devastation inflicted upon the aboriginals by the spears of colonialism is the issue which Oodgeroo tried to emanate in her poems of *We Are Going*. This paper intends to analyze these concerns of the poems from the perspective of eco-colonialism which unveils how colonial power and force is the potent cause of deforestation and eviction with a massive destruction of nature and it is inseparably linked with the expulsion of the tribal and aboriginals. This is a formidable explication of the problematic of colonialism where unlike the deep ecological extremist attitude of saving nature. Oodgeroo comprehends the reality that both human and nature are equally endangered and hampered. We need to be specific about one blaming human as a whole for destroying natural resources.

II

Eco-colonialism, one of the branch of eco-criticism, impinges upon the projects of colonial extension from a third world viewpoint of nature being exploited and indigenous people being ousted for the cause of so called modernized civilization. Eco-criticism, according to Glotfelty “is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious... literary studies.”(Garrard 3). Therefore, Eco-criticism including eco-colonialism are a political, cultural and sociological mode of analysis.

The eco-critical thoughts and ideas of American or Europeans (first world) are different, distinct and diverse from the views of the third world dwellers where “ ‘primitive’ people have been represented as living in harmony and comfort with nature and its own rules, thereby sustaining and spreading one of the most seductive myths about the non-European ‘Other’.”(Garrard 129). Australian aboriginals are the indigenous people or roots who celebrate and cherish the solidarity of their aboriginal identity. Ramachandra Guha emphatically delineates that the “central paradox of global environmentalism is that people who most actively destroy it.” (367). The pristine nature located in the hearts of Australia is devastated in the name of civilization or economic expansion. The movement for the conservation of biodiversity is fuelled principally by processes originating in richer countries who are themselves colonizers and paradoxically they failed to check their growing consumption of energy and natural resources. Guha points out that for them beautiful wilderness is merely one more goods to be consumed by the affluent society.

Guha, further explained the fact of “Environmental imperialism” where in the mask of conservation strategy, hunters and farmers who are natives of the forests are ousted and evicted. He cynically concludes that:

Tribal people in the Madagascar or Amazon forest are expected to move out only so that residents of London or New York can have the comfort of knowing that the lemur or toucan has been saved for posterity—evidence of which is then provided for them by way of the wildlife documentary they can watch on their television screen. (369)

The colonizers who take up the burden of civilization were largely been insensitive to the needs and aspirations of the indigenous tribal communities that live in or around habitats they wish to civilize and develop for posterity. The deep asymmetries in global consumption and West's profligate lifestyles ultimately not only destroys nature and wastes its resources but also devastates the lives, cultures, identities and social bonds and norms of the natives who inhabits those places.

Deep ecologists like George Sessions and Arne Naess in their anthology *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-first Century* supplants anthropocentrism by biocentrism, human needs by intrinsic value of nature, and civilization development by ecosphere.

Deep Ecology is concerned with encouraging an egalitarian attitude on the part of humans not only toward all members of the ecosphere, but even toward all identifiable entities or forms in the ecosphere. (Garrard 24)

Arne Naess has roughly rendered eight set of points to establish the theory of deep ecology. He formulates that both human and nature or 'non-human' entities have their own inherent individual worth where their flourishing values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes. He emphatically says that humans have no right to exploit the biodiversity except to satisfy their basic vital needs. Again, he shockingly concludes that the flourishing and nurturing of nonhuman life requires a smaller human population. Deep ecologists want to reduce and stabilize the excessive presence of human interference to control the worsening of nonhuman natural world. They wanted to change the policies of human living like ideological, technological and economic policies where they rely on adhering to dwelling in situations of inherent values rather than appreciating high standards of living. Alternative austere living of the human world is the only way out for them to mutate the earth into something ecological biodiversity.

Deep ecologists, as a whole, tried to evaluate everything from a bio-centric lens, not focusing exclusively on its effects on life as a whole, including the life conditions and situations of every species and systems. But different Marxist and Socialist ecologists are critical of their views. Our world is divided into different halves on the basis of different parameters and we cannot blame human in general for exploiting the environment. Critics like Guha in his essay "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique" is critical and skeptical of American deep ecologists. For him, two foremost and potential challenges against nature have nothing to do with the scenario of third world realities. The consumption and annihilation of natural treasures by the First World countries and the elites of the Third World countries including industrialization and growing militarization damage the world of natural harmony. Deep ecologists only consider and prioritize the need of non-human components. But critics like Bryan Norton opines that only human can change the face of nature and avoiding human in the arena of bio-centrism cannot help in changing or transforming the conditions of nature. This is the voice of sanity where we cannot deny the fact that human is at the centre and they can only improve the conditions of environment. And if human are not t the centre, then they should get equal importance as others residing on earth. Human should be included in eco-critical issue as part of wider nature.

III

Oodgeroo's very first poem in the collection, "Aboriginal Carter of Rights" voices that:

We want hope, not racialism,
Brotherhood, not ostracism,
Black advance, not white ascendance:
Make us equals, not dependants. (1-4)

The heterogeneity of human world specifies the fact that criticizing human as a whole is misanthropic. There are layers in human population where some live on excess and some on bare minimum; where some are excluded, denied, and suppressed and some are ruling, affecting, and destroying. Oodgeroo's very first poem of the collection *We are Going* voices for 'hope', 'brotherhood', 'equality', 'help', 'freedom', 'independence' and 'self-respect' instead of 'racialism', 'ostracism', 'exploitation', 'frustration', 'compliance' and 'resignation.' They are segregated; discriminated and condescended by the Whites. Being alienated in their own place, they yearn for their human rights. These indigenous people know how to judiciously live with nature, and in the name of civilization and their prevention they are looked down upon with aversion and coercion. Living in harmony with environment and surrounding, they hardly think about damaging it for fulfilling their needs. The labyrinth of civilized world only confuses them and one should be particular and specific before being critical about tribal or aboriginals. Colonial expansions has denigrated and diminished their lives, and instead of protection or assimilation or acculturation they are discriminated against. Their reality is as tempestuous and crude as the survival of natural resources which is subjugated and dilapidated by the process of colonization. They cannot be excluded or dissociated from the discourse of eco-criticism. Bio-centric notions both plea for nature and the aboriginals closely connected to nature.

The call for identity, citizenship and equality yearns for the abolition and eradication of caste and racist taboos which are labeled on them with the social status of "serfs on stations" and "fringe dwellers." Both natural biodiversity and these native peoples are alienated and deprived of their own place. Not only their communal identity and culture have been snatched away but also their human rights of safe living are stolen through "crucifixion" or mass killing for colonization. Colonization and deep ecological thoughts are incessant obfuscation where colonization in the name of civilization and modernizing barely serve the best impetus of human beings. Deep ecologists in understanding the dynamics of environmental degradation through the dichotomy of bio-centrism and anthropocentrism hardly fathom the integral potential problems of degradation. The dichotomy is completely irrelevant because only a few lot of human exploits and consumes resources. Tribal and aboriginals lives a mundane and compatible or complacent life with nature and their environment.

Incessant compulsion of carrying the cultural baggage of White's civilization spontaneously annihilates the old simpler lives of natives where they were "children of nature." The poetic persona in the poem "Then and Now" expresses that:

In my dreams I hear my tribe
Laughing as they hunt and swim,
But dreams are shattered by rushing car,
By grinding tram and hissing train,
And I see no more tribe of old
As I walk alone in the teeming town. (1-6)

The chasm and contradiction between “Then” and “now,” “past” and “present,” native indigenous culture and colonial culture is emblematic of greedy civilization engulfing and consuming the aboriginal domain where hunting and swimming is substituted by “rushing car,” “grinding tram” and “hissing train.” Colonial project, a beast for these natives, is dispossessing both natives and natural resources through eviction and deforestation.

The disjunctive binary of old and new, “corroboree” and “factory” is created by Oodgeroo to subvert the “value dualism” or “dualized structure of otherness and negation,” idea propagated by Karen J. Warren and Val Plumwood, where the duality of world is perceived in binary and always the old is rejected by new. But here she (Oodgeroo) is denying and denouncing the new colonialist capitalist world for “old ways” and “happiness.” She pleads to go back to wilderness where it was: “Better when I had only a dillybag/ Better when I had nothing but happiness.” (25-26). The eco-centric views of aboriginals and anthropocentric notions of colonizers excavate the fact that ecologists can critique the greedy disasters done by the excess of civilization but they cannot evade the plea of these natives for wilderness. They are in a state of psychological *terra nullius* and their repetitive beacon for help acknowledges the matter that they are as endangered as natural resources. They are equally affected by the buffets of colonial civilization.

Oodgeroo’s love for her tribal people, culture, tradition and land pours forth into her poetry which both beautifully depicts their indigenous ties and laments the loss of what they love through the history of colonization of these lands. “We are Going”—the all inclusive title of the poem allows to protest the treatment of their indigenous land and people, and to regain communal identity through inextricable link between human and natural world and cultural distinctiveness. They have lost not only their indigenous homes but parts of what it meant to be what they were their identity. Their heritage and culture were lost because it is too deeply integrated with the land and nature itself. This loss of identity precipitates their loss of culture. According to Donelle N. Dreese in her book “Eco-criticism: Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literature” says:

...part of the postcolonial condition is a loss of the self, a cultural alienation involving an eradication of cultural tradition a history, and national character. A

response to alienation is the attempt by colonized culture to retrieve and re-establish a sense of cultural identity. (Dreese 15)

“We” the plural pronoun includes the poetess with her aboriginal identity and nature thereby raising the voice of protest and resignation. Oodgeroo in her poem “We are Going” declares:

We are nature and the past, all the old ways

Gone now and scattered.

...

The corrobore is gone

And we are going. (21-27)

Identification of human with nature with the protest of going away foregrounds that instead of getting rejected, they are rejecting colonial civilization and deforestation and along with explicates that biocentrism cannot be nurtured without anthropocentrism. The bloody deploring process of civilization is evident from the establishment of “little town” at the cost of the lives of different animals, loss of old ritualistic bora ground and abolition of cultural ways of aboriginals. They are subdued barbaric and semi-naked beings who fail to speak out like nature. Spread of colonialism has transfigured their sacred bora ground into a rubbish dumping place. Old values are replaced by new cultural baggage where they are not “quite daybreak palling the dark lagoon” or “shadow ghosts creeping back” but scattered into pieces of “rubbish.” Therefore “we” is a counter discourse to the elitist capitalist establishments and an all inclusive identity. This gesture of resistance yearns for idyllic old values.

Ravenous history of eviction replaced by architectural events followed by myths created to justify the devastation of nature as a process of development ironically conduces how memory of indigenous aboriginals are also muted with the cartography and history of a place. These men cannot be isolated from nature and high rising buildings are ignorant of their terrible pain and tears of being homeless. The incident of Acacia Ridge as inscribed by Oodgeroo in her poem “Acacia Ridge” reminds us the groaning that:

Homeless now they stand and watch as the rain pours down;

This is the justice brought to the black man there,

Injustice which to whites you would never dare,

You whites with all the power and privilege

Who committed the crime of Acacia Ridge. (16-20)

The pathetic expulsion of the black natives from their own lands and homes coerce Oodgeroo to burst out towards the political discriminations of race and class. “Bulldozers” brutally crushing the homes are symbols of the dark criminal murderous side of civilization. The indices of progress should be the minimum meeting of needs to survive but this ruthless catastrophe is justified as a colonial myth of progress and development. These poverty-stricken, unheeded, black natives are inseparable from nature and they cannot be separated from it. Capitalist development is the ultimate source of suicidal and not human as a whole. One needs to be specific about blaming others. Her poem “the Unhappy Race” endorse that”

White fellow, you are the unhappy race

You alone have left nature and made civilized laws

...

Leave us alone ...

We want the old freedom and joy that all things have but you,

Poor white man of the unhappy race. (1-16)

Nature’s laws are broken in the name of civilization laws which snatched away the noble happiness of innocence and idyllic domain. Loss of Eden is eradication of nature and commencement of suffering or “unhappiness.” White civilized men are enslaved in the “collars” and “ties” of class, race and laws where they lack the leisure of old freedom and happiness.

Almost all the poems of the collection *We are Going* are eco-colonialist in character and can be used as a direct critique of deep ecologists’ idea of nourishing and conserving biodiversity in lieu of human population. But Oodgeroo’s final few poems depict her voice of sanity and hope of unity. She declares in “All One Race” that:

I’m for all humankind, not colour gibes

...

I’m international, never mind place;

I’m for humanity, all one race. (7-16)

Exploitation, feud, war and despise can be forgotten by forming “All one family” which shares one “sun” and “midnight sun” and not divides post.

As a form of protest, Oodgeroo has repeatedly and continuously endeavored to go back to tribal primitive days of hunting and gathering by denouncing new white ways. Obviously, it is both impossible and unrealistic to go back and she, judiciously, in “Let Us Not be Bitter” is

finally pleading for fraternity and unity where her "own dark people" will swipe away all bitterness and would accept change.

Life is change, life is progress,
Life is learning things, life is onward.
White men had to learn civilized ways,
Now it's our turn. (6-9)

Future solidarity is "like down after the dark," the penultimate fulfillment which can be a panacea for every gulf thereby creating a panorama of progress and stability, togetherness and utility.

Termination of past and beginning of future is tied with a single ray of hope that is a present. "A Song of Hope" sung by Oodgeroo ignites the flare that:

Look up, my people,
The dawn is breaking,
The world is waking
To a new bright day,
When none defame us,
No restriction tame us,
Nor colour shame us,
Nor sneer destiny. (1-8)

These aboriginals only desire equal acceptance and tolerance where they can freely propagate their cultural identity without any fear and shame. Oodgeroo is mostly critiqued for her call to go back to past days by subverting presence. But mostly critics see through the fact that she also wants progress and development but a sensitive and balanced one.

Thus, as William Rueckert renders that "the present codes of civilization is suicidal... the conceptual and practical problem is to find the grounds upon which the two communities—the human, the natural can co-exist, cooperate and flourish in the biosphere." We cannot avoid human in lieu of bio-centrism because human race is as endangered and hapless as the biodiversity is. It all wants a voice of sanity, unity and togetherness where affection and trust is the bond.

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