

ISSN: 0976-8165

Vol.8, Issue-V (October 2017)

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

8th Year of Open Access

The Criterion 

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

The Nature Wails with Me: Postcolonial Motifs and Themes in Welch's *Winter in the Blood*

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Article History: Submitted-09/09/2017, Revised-02/11/2017, Accepted-06/11/2017, Published-20/11/2017.

Abstract:

Native Americans were living peacefully in their primeval world but from time to time many outsiders posed threat to their calm world. Native Americans or American Indians are the original residents of America who have their own set of beliefs, and respect for Nature and its elements. They are the pre-Columbian inhabitants of North and South America consisting of various tribes. But their peaceful world has been plundered by the Europeans. The rich culture and resources of the Native Americans have been confounded by these outsiders. Many native authors have tried to put forward the consequences of foreign intrusion in the native land. James Welch was one such writer who examined the life of the natives before and after intrusion. In this research paper the focus will be on the postcolonial themes and motifs in Welch's *Winter in the Blood*. Nature is an inseparable part of native life and the life moves along with the movements of Nature. When the Natives have been relocated from their land, they were totally disillusioned. They worship Nature and the elements of Nature give them power. So the detachment from the native land is a source of agony for the original race. Their pain and aloofness is shared by each constituent of Nature. They showed revulsion against the intrusion in their respective ways as illustrated in this research paper.

Keywords: Native Americans, Post- colonial, Nature, Distance, Isolation, Alienation, Death.

Post-colonial literature addresses the problems and consequences of the decolonization of a country, especially the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated colonial peoples. It is a body of literary writing that responds to the intellectual discourse of European colonization in Asia, Africa, Middle East, the Pacific and elsewhere. This implies that it mainly deals with the Third World nations. According to George Manuel, the Native Americans fall in the category of Fourth World. In the early 1970's, he coined the term "Fourth World" which refers to the widely unknown nations (cultural entities) of indigenous peoples, i.e., "First Nations" living within or across national state

boundaries. Fourth World or least developed countries are the world's most impoverished and vulnerable countries. They are the most poverty-stricken, and economically troubled parts of Developed and Developing nations, for example, the Aborigines of Australia, Dalits and Tribes of India, Maoris of New Zealand and the Natives of America and so on. Fourth World nations consist of those excluded from the mainstream society of the colonizers. They are entirely self-sufficient but do not participate in global economy and they do not have any political ties.

Native Americans as a part of Fourth World suffered from severe conditions of desecration by alien forces that came into contact with them either in the guise of civilizing the Indians or through trade. The White Americans regarded Indians as inferior. In an attempt to civilize the original residents, the Whites made them suffer on social, political, economic and religious grounds. White Americans tried to 'assimilate' them in their own culture resulting in the loss of identity of Native Americans. Native Americans were forced to speak and learn the language of the Whites and practice their religion, thus harming their morals and ethics. The policy of 'assimilation' is a trait which includes Native Americans in the category of colonized people and Native American literature in postcolonial writing. Ania Loomba in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* very clearly suggests that

The 'forming of new community' in the new land necessarily meant *unforming* or re-forming the communities that existed there already; and involved a wide range of practices including trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, enslavements and rebellion. (2)

The whites had left no stone unturned to exploit the American Indians. They used every weapon to expand their territory by capturing the native land. From one-sided treaties to massacres, from bringing diseases and alcohol to the prohibition of their religious practices, and then the policies of re-location, termination, assimilation; the life of the natives was totally sliced.

The condition of the Native Americans has been quite improved but they still face subjugation like a colony. *Winter in the Blood* talks about such consequences of suppression of the American Indians. The novel is about a nameless narrator who is roving around aimlessly. His wandering and aimlessness suggests at his loss of identity because of his concealed ancestry. When the Whites muddled with the native land, serene world of the natives has been turned upside down. Natives have a great love and respect for Nature. The title of the paper "Nature Wails with Me" suggests the use of pathetic fallacy. Here Nature has been attributed with human qualities because Nature is an inseparable part of the native life. The native life has been ransacked and each element of Nature wailed for their lost world. James Welch has used many motifs and themes to signify the consequences of post-colonialism in the life of the original residents of America.

Yellow Calf's speech "The earth is cockeyed" (*WIB* 55) brings the whole crux of the novel. The White intrusion has turned the whole native world upside down. Yellow Calf has gone through the perplexities of the intrusion. While talking to the narrator Yellow Calf talks about the changes brought about by the invaders he admits that "things change-things have changed. They are not happy" (*WIB* 54). Being a true Native American, Yellow Calf has become one with the Nature. He understands the language of birds and animals and he comprehends their restlessness in the changed habitat. The whole world of the natives has been perverted and with them each element of Nature has been disturbed. The animals along with the humans are forcefully thrown out of their natural environment and thus there is a tone of despondency.

The novel opens with a note of gloom and destruction. In the epigraph there are signs of devastation as Lupton has quoted Nora Baker Barry where she says "the epigraph helps to set the tone for the Ruin theme of the novel's beginning, with its gravestones and bleached stones" (38). So there are the tones of mourning and sadness all around. The novel starts with the shades of ruin theme. The novel reads: "the roof had fallen in and the mud between the logs had fallen out in chunks, leaving a gray skeleton, home only to mice and insects" (*WIB* 1). With the relocation of the natives the land has been deserted with uncovered graves and decayed things. The graves have not been properly marked and were left open to insects. The whites intruded the native land like a destructive storm which left nothing but few remains of pre-existing life.

Foreign trespassing mostly brings distance- both physical and mental. The 'winter' in the title too suggests of this distance and deaths in the novel. On a wider level the distance signifies the detachment of the American Indians from their native lands and the death of their culture after being relocated. Then on the individual it is the aloofness of the narrator and other Indian characters from their native land, their true ancestry and most important being from their own selves. There are many deaths taking place in the novel like narrator's father First Raise, brother Mose, grandmother, cow and the old horse Bird. There are numerous deaths taking place during the Starvation Winter whose reference is given in the novel. These physical deaths have led to the mental numbness. There are various instances in the novel where the characters are facing detachment.

Distance and death surely brings isolation. The narrator feels isolated after the death of his father and brother. The grandmother and Yellow Calf suffered isolation as a result of separation from each other and from their culture. According to the narrator, his father was living an isolated life. He had a family but still he was alone. Being a family man, he needs to be loved and cared but he got nothing. He craved for satisfaction in his life. Amid these cravings and desires he met with a secluded death unnoticed by anyone. The narrator knows that his father was not happy with the changed circumstances outside and inside the house. Though First Raise loved his sons but he never shared his internal feelings of despondency with anyone. So he died without being heard.

The theme of exile in a broader sense signifies the exile of Native Americans from their original land. Additionally almost every character in the novel is in exile. Kenneth Lincoln has very beautifully made a comparison between the pre-colonial and colonial life of the Native Americans. She observes that: "Now exiled from Eden, face-down and "dirty", Earthboy Adamically suffers the fruit of "red-earth" disobedience; the bruised snake (no longer grandfather) eats dust, women ruled by husbands conceive in sorrow, and men farm a dead land" (154). This is an ironic comparison as the comparison is made through Christian mythology. Before the intrusion of the white race, the native world was as pure as the Garden of Eden. But now they have thrashed out and made to settle in a sterile land and their whole traditional world has been corrupted. It resulted in the loss of identities of the native people. Their traditional occupations have been changed. They are left with few pieces of infertile lands. And because of this transformation, every character is experiencing restlessness and aimlessness in their lives.

The intruding race not only occupied the land of the colonized nation but they distort their individualities making them mentally and spiritually weak. After this mental and spiritual death, this is very easy to rule the dummies of these native people. These spiritually dead people then wander here and there to revive their lost spirits and identities. They are absolutely baffled by these changes in their lives. Once the narrator while on the herding trip with Mose describes this confusion using the metaphor of dusk and cogitates:

"It was dusk, that time of day when the light plays tricks on you, when you think you can see better than you actually can, or see things that aren't there. The time of the day your eyes, ears, nose become confused, all become one gray blur in the brain, so you step outside your body and watch the movie of a scene you have seen before. So, it seemed, as I back and forth behind the herd, that I was somewhere else, not far, a hawk circling above or a beetle tracing corridor in the earth below the stamping hooves." (*WIB* 111)

After being suppressed by the dominant race the natives are living in a state of trance. They are unable to see any way out of their miseries. Their lives are moving in a downward direction. The natives have only shady memories of their past and a dwindling present where the power of thinking has been smeared. The narrator while herding the cows is mulling over his bewildered life compared to a hawk gyrating in the sky and beetle searching its way under the stamping hooves of the cattle. The movements of the hawk and beetle are heading them nowhere, similarly the narrator and other displaced natives are moving aimlessly. The narrator kept on roving in the whole novel, but finally he got nothing fruitful and returns back to the reservation, the place fixed for them by the Long Knives.

Animals hold an important place in Native American and too suffer on account of the intrusion of Whites. In this context the narrator's horse Bird is too an important character. The narrator truly remarks that "he felt he had much right to this place as we had, for even

now he was whinnying out a welcome. He was old and had seen most of everything” (WIB 12). The natives have been assimilated and become farmers from warriors, similarly Bird has been made a cow horse. He had been castrated; his true nature of a vigorous animal has been changed. Narrator can feel the pain of his horse Bird. The narrator was so attached to his horse and he can understand the agony of his inarticulate animal friend. He contemplates:

Those days your eyes tell me what you feel. It is the fault of the men who trained you to be a machine, A cow horse. You weren’t born that way; you were born to eat grass and drink slough water,. . . . They cut your balls to make you less temperamental, though I think they failed at that. (WIB 114-15)

The narrator has shared his happy and sad moods with Bird. Bird is his only companion after his father and brother had died. Bird acts as an animal helper in the contemporary native world. In the traditional native mythical stories, a warrior always needs an animal helper who gives him strength and shows him the right path. But the natives had left behind that traditional ceremonies and customs. Bird is truly a modern animal helper as he has felt the physical and mental burden of the narrator. He has helped him in every difficulty and lost his life while helping the narrator to save the cow. So till the end the old horse worked like a true Indian horse. He never took rest from his duties and resisted the unfriendly circumstances as did the Indians like Yellow Calf.

Welch has used various motifs which suggest separation and detachment. As the novel begins there is a reference to Earthboy place. According to Louis Owens, “Earthboys hints at the traditional Indian males who have disappeared from the Blackfoot world Welch describes- those Indians who once lived, secure in their identities, close to the earth” (130). But now the traditional role of Indian males has been distorted. They used to hunt and fight bravely against the enemies to shield their families. Now the Indian males are either busy in their farms or found roaming around in bars and cafes. Louis Owens in his book *Other Destinies* has truly predicted this situation when he comments that “as the men remove themselves more and more from their marginalized places within the daily workings of family life to wander aimlessly, Teresa and other women move to fill the void created” (135). So, as the traditional Earthboys are vanishing, the ladies of the house have to take a dominant position as did Teresa in the novel. But the role of women too has been restricted to house and farms. The strength, determinacy and the ethical outlook of the native women has been transformed. This is the reason of conflict between First Raise and Teresa and between many other native couples. The women look for support and security towards their male counterparts but these displaced, drunkard rambles are totally hopeless.

The borrow pit also held a significant role in the novel as Louis Owens has described that “Just as the very earth has been taken, so we come to realize Blackfoot culture and identity have been appropriated by dominant white culture, leaving a kind of nothingness in

their place- a dormancy, winter in the blood” (129). When the soil is taken out to make a pit, an emptiness is created, similarly the whites have snatched their culture and ethics from the natives. Indian culture is an inseparable part of Native American life. Their ethics flow like blood in their body and help them to live a moralistic life. Thus aloofness from culture means solidifying of native souls.

Approximately thirteen times in the novel there is an indication of the disappearance and non-availability of fish. The condition of the fish is equivalent to the plight of the Native Americans. As the natives feel a kind of breathlessness in the new atmosphere, similarly the fishes are dying in the new environment. The narrator informs that “the river ignored the fish and the fish ignored the river; they refused to even to die there. They simply vanished. The white men made tests; . . . ; they dumped other kinds of fish in the river. Nothing worked. The fish disappeared” (*WIB* 4). The fishes show such detestation of this new environment that they don't even die but became totally invisible. Despite of many efforts on the part of the whites, there is no sign of fishes. Their defiance is just like the old natives who fight until death to save their culture but never surrendered. They preferred death to assimilation. In context of the narrator the fish is relevant as it stands for “narrator's confusion concerning his own identity, his masculinity, and his spiritual sterility is epitomized in his bewilderment at various times about whether or not there might actually be fish in the waters” (Owens 132). The narrator is seen talking about fish in the river. The dilemma about the availability of the fish is like narrator's own confused identity and spiritual and mental annihilation. Additionally the Blackfoot avoid eating fish because they believe that rivers and lakes hold special power through habitation of Underwater People called the *Suyitapis*. The *Suyitapis* are the power source for medicine bundles, painted lodge covers, and other sacred items. A traditional disdain for fishing persists for many, despite the rich on-reservation fisheries.

In the novel, there is a repeated use of the motif of weaning a calf. Lame Bull informs: “Don't you know we're trying to wean this fool” (*WIB* 8). They were trying to wean the calf from its mother, similarly the Natives were detached from their original land, their motherland. The calf is seen bawling at several instances. This implies the lamentation of the original residents as they have been disassociated from their every belonging. They have lost their lands, religion, and the most painful is the loss of selfdom of many native youth because of their blurred ancestry. The relation between narrator and his mother, and Teresa and her mother also signifies such dissolution.

Killing of Amos duck for Christmas insinuates the sacrifice of a pure native being for the benefit of Whites. Teresa being an assimilated Indian, admits that she had killed the duck for the festival which held no importance for the Natives. Teresa has adopted the Catholic religion and her killing of Amos proclaims the death of her Indian life and purity. According to William W. Thackeray in his research paper *Animal Allies and Transformers*

of *Winter in the Blood*: “duck Amos is much more significant example of a role model, who provides the narrator of both an example of what he should do and a warning of what he should avoid” (50). Amos survived from a drowning experience where all its siblings died. Similarly, the narrator is single child after the Teresa gives the warning and comments that “One duck cannot be smarter than others” (*WIB* 12), she draws a parallel between the drowned ducks and the Indians. All the Indians are going through the same adversities. Whites are behaving nicely with the natives just to assimilate them into their own culture. But in reality they possess the feelings of detestation for the original race.

Throughout the novel the people are either talking or waiting for rain and there are signs of coming rain as the novel progresses. When the clouds break up and bring rain, similarly the clouded identity of the narrator is revealed towards the end of the novel. The land has become dry as there is “no rain since mid-June and the tarred barrels under the eaves of the house were empty” (*WIB* 3). The natives are thirsty, and this thirst is not going to be quenched with only rain water. This needs a heavy downpour of past revelations which will expose the concealed identities. The narrator is heading towards his ancestral past as the chances of rain are increasing and giving hope of revival and he “could see the silhouettes of the cottonwoods that marked the curving river. The coyotes had quit barking. It was going to rain” (*WIB* 31). The prospects of rain increases and decreases with the advancement of the novel as did the secret of narrator’s identity which is disclosed just at the end. After digging the grandmother’s grave the nameless narrator notices that “there was little chance of rain- it was the time of year when things grow stagnant, each morning following blue on the heels of the last, the sun rising, circling, day after day” (*WIB* 110). With the grandmother’s death the narrator’s mood has become pensive and the possibility to meet his descent also declines as grandmother is the only link with the past. So the chance of rain is again declining. And when the saturation point will come, the clouds will burst and the life on the earth will be rejuvenated. After the true lineage of the protagonist is revealed, there is an outburst of emotions. Consequently towards the end comes heavy rain washing away all the mysteries and perplexities. The following quote by Owens aptly concludes the whole novel as:

With the revitalizing rain in the offing, for the first the narrator engages his imagination in an attempt to comprehend a relationship involving deep commitment between man and woman, the only such relationship that exists in the novel. At the same time, through this act of imagination, he is bringing, the past into “temporal unification” with the present, a crucial step in the recovery of a “centered sense of personal identity (143).

Imagination held an important place in the life of Native Americans. The proclaiming rain clears all the doubts and miseries of the narrator and his imagination becomes strong. He enters into his ancestral world by first meeting his grandfather and then by throwing the

pouch into grandmother's grave. He is re-thinking about his lost relations. So his tribal and personal self is restored.

James Welch has described each minute change in the native world after intrusion. The themes and motifs are used in such a way that they tell the painful story of separation. The changed roles of traditional Earthboys, the deserted land, the uncovered graves are self-explanatory. Yellow Calf very well realized the agony of the mother Earth and her elements. He relates their dissatisfaction with the disenchantment of the original inhabitants of the land. The "earth is cockeyed" because the land on which the natives once lived happy and satisfied is now under the control of the outsiders. The land where the natives were once standing proud as owners are now dependent on the outsiders even for their basic needs.

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