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Entropic Urban Space in Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*

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Abstract:

Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* is a narrative of land which is evident from the title of the novel itself. Paton's fictional narrative is not simply about delineation of human suffering, but equally about suffering of the land in witnessing deterioration of its fundamental fabric in the wake of Imperialism and growing industrialisation. In the indigenous tribal culture of South Africa, human beings were an integral and organic part of natural ecosystem. But in the aftermath of industrialisation, close bonding of human and nature was adversely affected. In the present research, an attempt has been made to analyse narrative of the novel from ecocritical perspective to comprehend impact of ecological decay on the psyche of individual characters. Concept of entropy has been employed to study urban landscape of Johannesburg which reels under the pressure of growing native crime.

Keywords: Urban space, entropic, narrative, suffering, eco-critical.

Introduction:

Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* is a poignant narrative of racially segregated South Africa. It revolves around the predicament of two suffering fathers, who are brought together by a cruel turn of events that leads them on a tumultuous trajectory of love-hate relationship. The novel foregrounds moral dilemma of natives as well as European settlers in the aftermath of colonial rule in South Africa. Paton's deep attachment to the land of his birth finds its vivid representation in the pages of the novel. Land of South Africa is not merely a background in the novel, it rather acquires a distinct character. Paton foregrounds various aspects of ecological decay in both rural and urban South Africa. In the present research an attempt has been made to study and analyse cause and effect of ecological decay in mid twentieth century South Africa.

Alan Paton's novel has been very widely researched and analysed from various perspectives. Major thrust of research has been on the paternalistic and liberal tone of the author in discussing the sensitive issue of native crime in mid twentieth century South African Society. Stephen Watson's "*Cry, the Beloved Country* and the Failure of Liberal Vision" foregrounds limitations of Paton's liberalist ideology that governs the narrative of the novel. Watson believes that Paton's narrative fails to remain relevant in post-apartheid South African society that went through a process of complex social and political change. Andrew van der Vlies throws light on the canonical significance of Paton's novel in the history of South African literature in English in his paper "'Local' Writing, 'Global' Reading, and the Demands of the 'Canon': the Case of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*". Vlies points out that Paton's novel has been an international bestseller and a global phenomenon all across its history of publication and reception, even though it was considered too naïve and outdated at the time of its publication in South Africa due to its paternal tone and idealistic ethos. Andrew Foley adds a religious dimension to the discussion by focusing on the Christian message of the novel. Foley attempts to analyse how "Paton's liberalism informs his religious thinking and gives shape to a Christian perspective which is actively and intimately concerned with matters of social and political justice (116)."

Majority of research focuses on thematic, narrative, and canonical aspects of the novel. Few critics, however, have also touched upon the ecocritical and ecofeminist aspects of the novel. Brady Smith's "Beloved Countries: Labour, Landscape and the Politics of Conservation in Three Novels from KwaZulu-Natal" analyses Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* in dialogue with both Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) and Jonny Steinberg's *Midlands* (2002) with a view to study "the relationship between environmental history and literary form" (365). Sayed Mohammed Youssef attempts ecofeminist analysis of the novel in his article "The Question of Land and Woman: Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* from an Ecofeminist Perspective". Youssef foregrounds that narrative of the novel contains numerous instances of subjugation of women and nature by patriarchal and anthropocentric society in South Africa in mid twentieth century.

Major thrust of existing research on the novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* has been on the socio-political issues such as efficacy of liberal Christian ideology in racially segregated South Africa and global reception of the novel as a quintessential text of South African literary canon.

Some critical endeavours have also been taken to study manipulation and subjugation of nature and women in the society. The novel, however, can be further explored to comprehend catastrophe of environmental decay that adds to the angst of the members of both rural and urban society in South Africa.

Issue of ecological imbalance lies at the heart of *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Alan Paton weaves his poignant narrative in the backdrop of rural landscape of Ndotsheni and Carisbrooke nestled in the lush green valley of Umzimkulu and in the urban space of metropolitan Johannesburg. Present research focuses on the binary of nature-culture as depicted in the novel. It endeavours to find answer to some of the following pertinent questions:

What is the nature of ecological decay in rural society?

What are the ways in which urban decay is different from rural decay?

How entropic urban space accelerates moral degeneration among the native migrants?

Does novel offer any solution to the problem of ecological and psychological deterioration?

The chosen area of study requires qualitative research based on textual analysis of the primary text in light of the relevant secondary material. Present research follows theoretical framework of ecocriticism in general and concept of “entropy” and “symbiosis” in particular to comprehend complex relationship of natural and human world.

Discussion

At the outset, Paton paints a contradictory picture of natural landscape in East Griqualand. First picture is that of symbiosis that Peter Barry defines as “mutually sustaining, co-existing system” (251). The mountains of Ingeli are thickly covered with lush greens grass. This green cover makes soil capable of holding rain water and feeds nearby streams which in turn sustain human and animal inhabitation in the area. However, the moment one descends into the valley of Umzimkulu ecological decay is clearly evident:

But the rich green hills break down. They fall to the valley below, and falling, change their nature. For they grow red and bare; they cannot hold the rain and mist, and the streams are dry in the kloofs. Too many cattle feed upon the grass, and too

many fires have burned it. Stand shod upon it, for it is coarse and sharp, and the stones cut under the feet. It is not kept, or guarded, or cared for, it no longer keeps men, guards men, cares for men. The titihoya does not cry here any more. (Paton 3)

The above picture clearly delineates rural entropy, wherein “negative energy” is bringing about “breakdown and disorganisation” of tribal society in the village of Ndotsheni (Barry 251). Anthropocentrism lies at the heart of ecological decay in the rural landscape of South Africa. Excessive exploitation of natural resources leads to the erosion of fertile layer of soil and drying up of grass. Subsequently rural society finds it difficult to sustain itself, since it loses both the basic means of survival i.e. agriculture and animal husbandry. Ursula K Heise, a prominent ecocritic, cautions humanity against excessive exploitation and domination of nature:

This domination strips nature of any value other than as a material resource and commodity and leads to a gradual destruction that may in the end deprive humanity of its basis for subsistence. Such domination empties human life of the significance it had derived from living in and with nature and alienates individuals and communities from their rootedness in place. (503)

In the village of Ndotsheni families find it hard to make the both ends meet. Consequently village youth migrate to metropolitan cities like Johannesburg in search of better opportunities. Ndotsheni becomes a village of “old men and old women, of mothers and children”, since the “soil cannot keep” young men and women any more (Paton 4).

Nevertheless, migration of village youth to metropolitan cities does not bring them any closer to greener pastures. Rather it accelerates their moral, ethical decay. Cities like Johannesburg reel under the pressure of excessive influx of rural migrants. The city fails to provide bare minimum means of existence to the native migrants and they end up living a miserable life in Shanty Towns at the outskirts. Paton paints a dismal picture of dystopic Shanty Town in Alexandra:

Even here the children laugh in the narrow lanes that run between these tragic habitations. A sheet of iron, a few planks, hessian and grass, an old door from some forgotten house. . . .There is drought over the land, and the sun shines warmly down

from the cloudless sky. But what will they do when it rains, what will they do when it is winter? (62)

Inhabitants of Shanty Town live under precarious circumstances where they are not even properly sheltered from extreme weather conditions. The children suffer from critical health issues and their parents fail to arrange proper treatment. Paton delineates heart wrenching predicament of a native woman whose young child dies in her arms after a bout of cough and fever. The helpless mother runs from one quarter to the other to get her child treated by a doctor, but by the time doctor comes the child expires. Instances like these throw light on the failure of government machinery in creating an equitable society. It also exposes drab reality of racially segregated South Africa where the class of European Colonial settlers enjoy their privileged position and lead a life of comfort and luxury, while natives are relegated literally on the margins of urban settlements and are compelled to lead a deplorable life. The picture of urban catastrophe of Johannesburg bears close similarity with William Rueckert's idea of ecological nightmare "of a monstrously overpopulated, almost completely polluted, all but totally humanized planet" which Rueckert believes is a result of "violating laws of nature" by anthropocentric vision and desire of human beings to "conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing" (113). The idea of land ownership and mining natural resources of South Africa by European colonisers leads to the state of social inequality, which further promotes mutual hate and distrust between native Africans and White settlers in post-colonial society.

Paton's narrative also describes constrained efforts made by government authorities to solve the problems of native migrants by arranging better houses for them. Such efforts, unfortunately, could not keep pace with the rate of population influx in the urban centres. Consequently, administrative authorities have to take a nefarious turn in their policies and resort to forceful slum clearance measures. Following account of an inhabitant of Shanty Town throws light on the precarious scenario of urban entropy:

The white men come to Shanty Town. . . .They come and wonder what they can do, there are so many of us. What will the poor devils do in the rain? What will the poor devils do in the winter? Men come, and machines come, and they start building rough houses for us. . . . And no sooner do they begin to build for us, than there come in the night other black people, from Pimville and Alexandra and

Sophiatown, and they too put up their houses of sack and grass and iron and poles. And the white men come again, but this time it is anger, not pity. The police come and drive the people away. (59)

Most of the native migrants feel frustrated and despaired after coming to metropolitan cities like Johannesburg where their dreams of achieving success, prosperity and happiness are shattered in an inequitable society. These native migrants often crave for their simple life in the countryside and curse themselves for falling to the temptation of Big Cities. Following statement of a native woman bears testimony to the fact that urban settlements turn out to be worse than their coarse rural existence:

I am tired and lonely. Oh my husband, why did we leave the land of our people? There is not much there, but it is better than here. There is not much food there, but it is shared by all together. If all are poor, it is not so bad to be poor. And it is pleasant by the river, and while you wash your clothes the water runs over the stones, and the wind cools you. (Paton 56)

Disgruntled psyche of the native migrants, eventually, prompts them to rebel against the unjust government that nurtures racial discrimination. Some of the natives assort to legitimate means of resistance in the form of mine workers' union, where native leaders like John Kumalo, Tomlinson and Dubula raise issues of workers' exploitation by White mine owners. John Kumalo highlights plight of mine workers and indifference of mine owners towards their genuine concerns:

We know that we do not get enough, Kumalo says. We ask only for those things that laboring men fight for in every country in the world, the right to sell our labour for what it is worth, the right to bring up our families as decent men should. They say that higher wages will cause the mines to close down. Then what is it worth, this mining industry? And why should it be kept alive, if it is only our poverty that keeps it alive? They say it makes the country rich, but what do we see of these riches? Is it we that must be kept poor so that others may stay rich? (Paton 184)

John Kumalo's Marxist exhortations ignite hope in the heart of mine workers but they fail to bring about any change in the social fabric of racially segregated Johannesburg. Capitalist ideology puts so much emphasis on profit making that it begins to legitimise exploitation of both

human and natural resources. Lance Newman exposes the facade of modern progressive discourse of Capitalism that boasts of taking humanity on the path of development, though in reality it creates an unjust inequitable society:

. . . anthropocentric ideas about the subordination of nature to human progress explain as natural the oppressive patterns of resource exploitation on which capital depends. But the fact is that these patterns oppress not merely nature, but also most people. Access, not only to the products of modern industry, but also to such things as clean air, water, and food, is sharply stratified by class and, within class, by race and gender. (13)

Instead of working for the betterment of natives, White European settler community has its own serious concerns regarding safety and security of life in the wake of growing native crime. The only solution they can think of peaceful co-existence is clear demarcation of territories between native Africans and European settlers. But this distribution of territories is done in an extremely biased and unjustified manner, for it brings privileged class of European settlers to the centre stage and relegates native Africans to the abysmal periphery. As such, the problem of growing native crime is not salvaged but it becomes even more horrific.

Places like Alexandra and Orlando that are exclusively inhabited by native Africans become breeding ground for criminals. While accompanying Stephen Kumalo to Alexandra, Msimangu describes the place in the following manner:

Alexandra was outside the boundaries of Johannesburg, and was a place where a black man could buy land and own a house. But the streets were not cared for, and there were no lights, and so great was the demand for accommodation that every man if he could, built rooms in his yard and sublet them to others. Many of these rooms were the hide-outs for thieves and robbers, and there was much prostitution and brewing of illicit liquor. (Paton 44)

Indeed, some White people of Orange Grove, Norwood and Highlands North felt so threatened by it that they demanded doing away with the place altogether. Such demands, however, were never fulfilled, since there were some liberal White men, like Arthur Jarvis, who sympathised with the natives and relentlessly worked for their upliftment. Ironically this same conscientious

White man Arthur Jarvis becomes a prey of native crime and his brutal murder exposes futility of elitist intellectual discourse that fails to bring grass-root level changes in society.

The urban landscape of Johannesburg turns into a veritable entropic system where “negative energy” of racial hatred and distrust brings about “break down and disorganisation” of the whole society. Native migrants break their strong bonds with the land they were born in and in the process also lose their moral and religious bearing. Msimangu explains the situation by foregrounding issue of cultural onslaught on the indigenous African tribal system:

The white man has broken the tribe. And it is my belief . . . that it cannot be mended again. But the house that is broken, and the man that falls apart when the house is broken, these are the tragic things. That is why children break the law, and old white people are robbed and beaten. (Paton 25-26)

Tribal society of Ndotsheni sustained itself for many generations by maintaining symbiotic ecosystem, but cultural onslaught of European colonisers uprooted indigenous tribes and coaxed them to migrate to the big cities in search of material prosperity. White mine owners wanted cheap labour who could work in the mines for a meagre daily wage of thirty shillings and native migrants wanted to attain same level of success and prosperity as that of their White masters. Their conflicting interests soon gave rise to social unrest. Native youth like Absalom and Matthew get tempted to the world of crime for making easy and quick money. They represent a whole class of frustrated native migrants who witness shattering of their dreams of becoming rich and successful in a society that is unethically discriminating on the basis of race, class and gender. Their anger and frustration makes them believe that they are justified in resorting to illegal acts of theft, robbery, prostitution and sale of illicit liquor. This whole process of moral and ethical decay is further accentuated by racial segregation of land. The marginal areas in the city of Johannesburg that are assigned to natives are overpopulated and uncared for. These areas soon become centres of urban entropy and threaten complete annihilation of the system of law and order in Johannesburg.

Alan Paton's narrative not only delineates cause and effect of urban entropy but also offers some possible solutions to salvage the issue. First solution, as per Paton, that can control urban migration is by making rural societies sustainable through scientific means of agriculture and by

developing harmonious mutual relationship between natives and European settlers. Legal system can also be reformed by developing fair and just laws for each and every citizen and by introducing vocational training for the convicts in Reformatories. The third and most fundamental reform suggested by Paton is revival of tribal culture along with spreading Christian message of peace and brotherhood in the society.

Conclusion:

Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* finds its relevance in contemporary society due to its inherent message of value and need of ecologically sustainable society. Paton's vivid portrayal of urban entropy in mid twentieth century South Africa serves as a potent reminder to humanity at large that anthropocentrism of modern Capitalist state will lead us to the catastrophe of ecological disaster. As such requisite measures should be taken to preserve and protect environment for ensuring equitable society in all times to come.

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