Negotiating Postcolonial Ecologies: Representation of the Disruption of Identity and Natural Harmony in Selected Poems of Kath Walker, Carol Ann Duffy, Vachel Lindsay

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> The very ideology of colonization is … one where anthropocentricism and Eurocentrism are inseparable, with the anthropocentrism underlying the Eurocentrism being used to justify those forms of European colonialism that see indigenous cultures as "primitive", less rational, and closer to children, animals and nature.
>
> ~ Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010)

Colonization was marked by economic exploitation, social injustice, political subjugation, and cultural oppression and inflicted lasting psychological impacts, eroding local autonomy and leaving societies grappling with enduring losses. The experience of oppression and discrimination had significant psychological impacts on individuals and communities, which not only included the loss of their ancestral lands but also the loss of their self-esteem, agency, culture, language, self-identity, and sense of belonging. Natural resources were also affected by colonisation, as European powers sought to control new territories by introducing foreign species and modifying landscapes for their benefit, leading to far-reaching ecological consequences.

Ecological imperialism, a term coined by historian Alfred W. Crosby, deals with the form of colonial expansion that extends beyond the human population to encompass the exploitation and manipulation of natural environments. It encapsulates the ecological consequences of colonization, wherein colonizing powers often employed practices that disrupted and transformed local ecosystems in pursuit of their economic, social, and political objectives. While talking about Crosby's use of the term, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin point out its flexibility in intensity and implications as it consisted of everything from 'the violent appropriation of indigenous land to the ill-considered introduction of non-domestic livestock and European agricultural practices' and it has come at the cost of 'historical specificity', blurring the lines between different types of environmentalism or by 'collapsing imperialism into an all-purpose concept-metaphor that fails to distinguish between general ideologies of domination and specific socio-historical effects.' (Huggan 2010, 3)

The age of exploration and colonization began from the 15th century onwards, one of the significant examples of ecological imperialism is the Columbian Exchange, which resulted in the movement of plants, animals, and diseases between the Old World (Europe, Africa, and Asia) and the New World (the Americas). This exchange had profound ecological consequences, as it led to the introduction of non-native species, the displacement of indigenous flora and fauna, and the alteration of the entire ecosystem. Apart from this, there is the exploitation of natural resources for timber, minerals, agricultural land, hunting and so on which often led to deforestation, soil degradation and a loss of bio-diversity which resulted in long-term disruption of ecological balance and the damage still persists. A form of ecological imperialism is environmental racism which Deane Curtin, the American environmental philosopher defines as 'the connection, in theory and practice of race and environment so that the oppression of one is connected to, and supported by, the oppression of the other.' (Huggan 2010, 4)

The settlers harboured no curiosity or respect for the culture or practices of the indigenous people. The settlers believed that they were 'conferring… the gifts of civilization to the benighted heathen' (Huggan 2010, 7) and had hardly any interest in learning their philosophy. The Europeans introduced the concept of animal husbandry and agriculture. The indigenous people hunted animals for sustenance while the Europeans looked at it as a game for the aristocrats. The native population was unfamiliar with the distinction between 'wild' and 'domesticated' animals, a distinction brought in by the European colonizers. There were Indian groups that loosely used dogs for hunting and the women used hawks to protect their corn but they never owned the animals. The fact that Indigenous men spent their time hunting – the colonialists perceived them to be lazy because, for them, hunting was a leisure activity for the upper classes. As the white settlers encroached on the native lands, initially there were some attempts at agreements. However, time only increased the number of settlers, and more forests were destroyed for livestock and agriculture leading to animals losing their natural habitat and gradually encroaching upon the Indian territories, and the agreements were soon forgotten.

Throughout the history of colonisation, colonialists employed cunning and manipulative tactics to advance their agenda. They used their intelligence and cleverness to deceive innocent indigenous people who were not as astute or manipulative, resulting in loss of land, homes, and ultimately, identity. The indigenous people with their humble lifestyle were a no match to the colonizers and the former therefore ended up losing their lands, their home, and in the long run, their very own identity. The story of land being measured using ox-hide is quite common which states how the colonialists tricked the indigenous Americans claiming to take only as much land as an ox-hide. 'Given the small size of a single hide, the locals agree, and then the colonizers proceed to cut it into a fine string with which they encircle much more land than was envisioned by the locals.' (Jackson 2013, 31) Something similar is seen in Carol Ann Duffy's poem 'Selling Manhattan'. The poem, divided into two sections reflects the white man's perspectives (first four lines) and the Native American's perspective. The poem captures a conversation between Dutch settlers and the Lenape community, who were unaware of the concept of buying and selling land:

> '*All yours, Injun, twenty-four bucks' worth of glass beads, / gaudy cloth. I got myself a bargain. I brandish / fire-arms and fire-water. Praise the Lord. / Now get your red ass out of here.*' (Duffy, lines 1-4)

The introductory italicised lines of the poem serve to emphasise the disproportionate trade that resulted in the acquisition of thousands of acres of Native American land for a meagre sum of 'twenty-four bucks' worth of glass beads' by European settlers (Duffy). The ensuing verses of the poem poignantly depict the profound loss of the Indigenous peoples' connection to their land which was seen as nothing more than a mere resource by the European colonizer. The choral voice of the Indigenous people highlights the ramifications of this reductive perspective, painting an elegy for a world that was once sacred but soon will be completely lost. Reynolds points out that over the years urbanization has 'gradually replaced traditional subsistence cultures and separated humans from the ecosystems that had nurtured them.' (Reynolds 2007, 16). According to contemporary experts and researchers, the Lenape leaders who negotiated with the Dutch may have believed that they were entering into some land-sharing agreement rather than giving away their land completely, and the glass beads offered by the Dutch were seen as symbols of friendship rather than mere transactional exchange. However, what was mere land to the settlers was of immense signification to the Indigenous people as these lands represented specific lands where 'visions took place, where spiritual beings can be contacted, and where human place in the moral order of things can be understood' (Hendrix 2005, 769) and therefore were closely associated to their identity.

The poem carefully delineates the stark difference between the Dutch settlers and the Lenape people. While the European takes pride in their 'fire-arms and fire-water' (no citation) and has only disdain towards the Native Americans and for nature, the Lenape leader has love and respect for the land and nature. To him, they are not just mere resources to be used up without any concern but the very nature that has sustained them for generations, the resources are like guiding and nurturing spirits that look after the well-being of the entire tribe. He knows that everywhere the colonialist has touched the earth, the 'earth is sore' (Duffy). He wonders what the ground or the spirit of water will have to say as the colonizer will destroy and poison them with their activities. The Lenape leader speaks with 'true love for his land', his 'dawn chant', 'starlight psalm', and 'song of sunset' are all celebrations of nature (Duffy). Robin Ridington says, 'Native spiritual traditions live in song, story, and ceremony…. They represent things the way they are. They constitute a language of performance, participation, and experience. They represent the cosmic order within which the world realizes its meaning.' (Ridington 1996, 468) The indigenous people have lived in harmony with the 'world's slow truth', in nature's 'solemn joys and sorrows'; the Europeans will only destroy and inflict harm because their lifestyle is not in sync with nature. (Duffy)

The Lenape leader issues a warning to the European coloniser, asserting that their activities would not bring any good. He puts forward a rhetorical question 'Man who fears death, how many acres do you need / to lengthen your shadow under the endless sky?' (Duffy). Although not as clever or cunning as the white settler, the Lenape leader is conscious of the fleeting nature of human existence. Human beings are afraid of death, yet they spend their lives preoccupied in their efforts to acquire more land or material wealth, the settler derives their sense of security from possessing the natural resources that were not even theirs in the first place. The natural world is vast and infinite and stands in contrast with the transient nature of human life. The last few stanzas seem to bring out a sense of dejection yet acceptance in the Lenape leader. He has lost his sacred land to the cunning of the European man; their loss will be remembered by nature as the leader expresses his desire to unite with the grasshopper and the buffalo. Even in his loss, he wishes to be one with the nature that has sustained him. The loss of land is beautifully described as 'a boy feels his freedom / vanish, like the salmon going mysteriously / out to sea' (Duffy). The sadness of the leader is shared by the evening as soon enough he will disappear 'into the darkening pines' like a shadow making it seem that they never existed on this land that once was theirs.

Despite not having an American experience, Carol Ann Duffy skillfully and sensitively portrays how the earliest colonizers perceived the New World and vice-versa. By dividing the poem into two parts, Duffy has brought out the very difference in philosophy and ideology between the two races. While the European is a monotheistic

Christian serving their God, the Indigenous population has found their spirituality in nature, and through their worship of nature they find their identity and therefore they aim to preserve it. What is extremely sacred to the Lenape people, the colonizers can only look at it as a resource waiting for commercialization. Yet the indigenous people have lived without any of the exploitation for centuries, continuing with their natural practices and ceremonies to worship their home. 'Cultural identity depends upon the continuation of subsistence practices and ceremonies celebrating the Creator's gifts to the people. Natural resources are therefore synonymous with cultural resources. To degrade one is to destroy the other' (Reynolds 2007, 16). Duffy's use of vivid metaphor and imagery and her use of dual voices create a poignant and evocative poem which makes the readers reflect on the sobering implications of colonization and exploitation of Indigenous lands, cultures, and heritage.

Building upon the theme of environmental devastation and the impact of colonisation on the indigenous populations, Vachel Lindsay's work "The Flower-Fed Buffaloes" utilises vivid imagery to contrast the idyllic North America pre-colonisation with the reality of technological advancement and exploitation. Through its use of rich metaphors, the poem brings out a sense of sadness and loss that comes with environmental devastation. The poem opens with the very image of the North American buffalo, often referred to as the bison, grazing lazily in the vast landscapes filled with perfumed grass and prairie flowers. This idyllic image is broken by the introduction of locomotives in the picture. By casually overlapping the two images Lindsay strikes the 'the right balance of observation and evocation' as he dexterously creates the 'American past' that has shaped the present nation of 'abundant resources, squandered riches, technological sophistication, exploitation of native Americans'. (Ward 1985, 243)

Through the image of the North American buffaloes, Lindsay speaks about the life of the Native Americans. Like the buffaloes that lived in harmony with nature, the tribes were the same, they were extremely dependent on their land for their food and sustenance and therefore regarded it as sacred. The use of the word 'flower-fed' suggests a harmonious relationship, which was an integral part of the indigenous lifestyle and culture. It is not very difficult to picture the buffaloes and the Native Americans existing side-by-side, deriving their food from the same grounds highlighting the interconnectedness and interdependence of living beings and nature and yet never interfering with each other or with the course of time, never having the need to transform their surroundings for any personal gain. The season of spring adds to the pastoral imagery, as it sets a tone of freshness, renewal, and vitality thereby evoking a pristine natural setting. It takes us far away from anything remotely urban conveying a sense of serenity, and purity of the natural world and affirms its ability to sustain itself without the need for any human intervention. 'For most Native peoples, land and the resources it holds (particularly wildlife) are not simply things – they are parts in a complex web of interrelated spiritual and natural relationships, relationships that put individuals under moral obligations to respect them.' (Hendrix 2005, 769)

The poem takes a sombre turn as the poet introduces the imagery of locomotives and wheat fields. The flower-fed buffaloes belonged to 'days of long ago', and the animals have been replaced by the spinning wheels of the trains while 'tossing, blooming, perfumed grass' have been removed as wheat fields have covered the land (no citation). This shift in imagery conveys a sense of destruction and changes the mood of the poem. The European settlers had little regard for nature or wildlife or for the lives of the Native Americans. They hunted and destroyed with equal fervor. Hunting the buffalo was a common sport among the settlers who arrived with suitable firearms. Once abundant on the continent, buffaloes were nearly extinct due to commercial hunting and due to the diseases brought in by the domestic animals of the settlers. Ward points out that the 'buffaloes were intrinsically noble and otherworldly, threatening, massive, primitive, almost amusing but helpless…' (Ward 1985, 243). Even today, the American bison remains a near-threatened species. The white settlers had no regard for the perfumed grass or the vast fields of prairies. The land was cleared to make space for locomotives to run, for the cultivation of wheat, for things that the settlers considered useful. They treated the human beings living on those lands exactly like the buffaloes. The Native Americans had neither the arms nor the cunningness of the settlers. They were deprived of their lands, the very source of their sustenance, culture, and identity.

In the last three lines of the poem, the poet adopts a poignant and nostalgic tone as he draws a comparison between the mistreatment of the buffaloes as well as the Native American tribes, particularly the tribes of Blackfeet and Pawnee. The repeated use of the phrase 'lying low' creates a sense of foreboding and loss (Lindsay). Ward says, '…The Indians have been laid low, defeated and buried, even transmogrified as the flowers have been transformed into more useful products…they lie low, … waiting for their time to come again.' (Ward 1985, 243) It is not just a metaphor for death but evokes the idea of an irreversible loss which cannot be compensated for. The consequences of colonisation are not limited to the physical destruction of nature or the decimation of buffaloes and tribes, but also the loss of culture, traditions, and ways of life which were deeply intertwined in a harmonious and sustainable relationship with the world of nature. The last lines are nostalgic yet poignant in their magnitude of tragedy as colonization's profound impact has only brought absence and emptiness. It is almost as if the land is stripped away of its beauty and bounty and liveliness as the buffaloes and the Native tribes and the prairie flowers have been replaced by lifeless locomotives puffing out smoke and the monotonously coloured wheat fields and that are the consequences of human greed and exploitation.

While writing about how ancient spirituality has been lost in modern-day Western ethics, Reynolds mentions, 'The Judeo-Christian ethic revealed the earth as a gift for exploitation and temporary habitation. Natural resources became disconnected from human identity and spirituality. Heaven, not Earth, became the human spiritual realm' (Reynolds 2007, 16). The indigenous communities are closely tied to the earth, even in their death. Many indigenous cultures have traditional burial practices and ceremonies. The burial sites are chosen based on their cultural significance and spiritual importance and are considered sacred grounds where the spirits of the dead may rest and be united with the land and their ancestors. While burying is a part of the Christian tradition as well, but the deceased is believed to rise above the Earth to the higher spiritual realm of Heaven and be united with God. In contrast, the indigenous people believed that the deceased become a part of the spirits of the earth and this belief forms an integral part of their worldview. They believe that nature itself has various spiritual beings like those of animals, plants, water, rocks – they are seen as living beings capable of influencing the well-being of their communities. Their ancestors, after death, become intricately intertwined with nature and they guide the communities and their presence is believed to influence the ongoing cycles of life and season.

The mistreatment of sacred land comes out more poignantly in Kath Walker's poem 'We are Going'. The poem appears in an anthology of the same name and it is the first book of poems published by an Aboriginal Australian. The poem thoughtfully explores the impact of colonization in the lives of Aboriginal Australians as settlers who are displaced and eradicated from their familiar surroundings to make space for the European settlers as their destruction not only destroy lives or nature but also erodes the identity and culture of the people of an entire continent. Walker who is more commonly known by her Aboriginal name Oodgeroo Noonuccal, was a writer and member of the Noonuccal tribe. The Noonuccal people are a part of the Quandamooka people from North Stradbroke Island, Queensland, Australia. Growing up in Stradbroke Island, she witnessed several customs of the tribe which were still in practice. Although she was baptized as Kathleen Jean Mary Ruska, Walker in her later life gave up her Christian name and adopted the name Oodgeroo Noonuccal as an expression of her cultural identity and her activism for the rights of Aboriginal people in Australia. Through her successful campaign against discriminatory and anti-Aboriginal sections of the Australian constitution, she became a prominent advocate for Indigenous rights, land rights, and environmental conservation. Her poetry and her activism were deeply intertwined bringing attention to the social, cultural, and environmental issues faced by the Aboriginal Australians thereby raising awareness towards a positive change.

The beginning of the poem is spoken from the perspective of an outsider who describes the 'silent' arrival of a 'semi-naked band' of people to a little town (Noonuccal). When the poet says 'All that remained of their tribe', it could mean the few surviving people or that silence and subjugation are all that remains of the once vibrant tribe (Noonuccal). The town now stands on their former bora ground, yet no signs of it are visible. The white settlers have taken over their sacred land, and a garbage dump covers the remaining traces of the old bora ring. The term 'bora' refers to both an Aboriginal ceremony and the site of the ceremony. A bora ceremony marks the initialization of boys into manhood and while the aspects of it may vary from tribe to tribe but it usually involves scarification, circumcision, subincision, or the removal of a tooth. The physical rituals are followed by the teaching of traditional sacred songs, religious visions, dances, or lore which are specific to a tribe. The bora grounds are sacred and the ceremony is a way for the tribes to reinforce their spiritual beliefs, social structures, and traditional values. It is a unique yet integral part of the Aboriginal lifestyle and culture. The pattern of bora land may vary from tribe to tribe but it usually has stone arrangements, rock engravings, and other artworks. Some cultures associate the ceremony with Baiame, the creator spirit.

From the eighth line onwards, the poet shifts to the inclusive pronoun 'we' to represent and express the voices of all the Australian Aboriginals who have been removed from their lands, oppressed, and marginalized as the settlers took over their continent. The tribe has become strangers to their own land, while the real strangers are the white men who 'hurry about like ants' (Noonuccal). The next few lines establish the strong connection the tribes shared with their sacred land and every tiny object of nature and its forces. Their identity lies in the bora ground, in the corroboree, in the ancient ceremonies and laws and wisdom passed down by the elders. A corroboree is a ceremonial meeting of Indigenous people and is characterized by festive celebration or warlike gatherings. In the next few lines, Walker beautifully brings out their history and the deep emotions attached to it. The little town was once their land; where they had their hunts and laughing games. They had their sacred relationship with the lightning, the thunder, the daybreak, and every other spirit of 'nature and the past' (Noonuccal). The Aboriginal Australians see themselves to be a part of nature, they are not separated from it. Their ceremonies, cultures, and emotions are deeply intertwined with the world around them.

In the final lines of the poem, there is an apparent sense of dejection and sadness that takes over as the native people accept their fate and loss. The Aboriginals, now living without their sacred land, are scattered, taking with them their traditional ways of living, their wisdom, and their culture. The far-reaching environmental consequences that have come with the displacement of the Aboriginals from their land are evident. The settlers did not feel the need to protect the environment or the wildlife. The shrubs are no more to be seen. The eagle, the emus, and the kangaroos are also gone from the place. The animals, especially the emu and the kangaroo, represent the unique biodiversity of the land. The animals have either been hunted down, or they have lost their habitat and therefore had to migrate to some other place. There is no more the space for the bora ring, or the corroboree, and as the poet ends with the line 'And we are going', we realize that the Australian Aboriginal has no other option left but to leave everything (Noonuccal). The line can be seen as a comment on how the marginalized voices will be silent in mainstream narratives as they will struggle to retain their identity in the face of colonization, oppression, and other adversities. Healy remarks,

> Aboriginal literature, from the beginning, remained committed to a collective Aboriginal experience. It was, even in the first moments, a literature of wound, vulnerable in its directness, open in its uncertainty,

> and at the same time, reluctant to apply closure to its relations with the surrounding white society. (Healy 1988, 80)

However, Oodgeroo has something different to say about her poem. She says,

> [The poem] is a double-header. Saying we are going was a warning to the white people: we can go out of existence, or with proper help we could also go on and live in this world in peace and harmony. It was up to the whites. Now the whites have proved to us that they're going the wrong way about it. But the Aboriginals will not go out of existence; the whites will. We are going to live; the whites are going to die. (Huggan 2010, 95)

The poem affirms their sacred connection to their land which the white people do not have. The connection to the land is not merely physical but extends to a spiritual and ancestral realm, where it forms the foundation of their stories and cultural practices. The land, with its natural features, holds the stories of creation, providing a spiritual map that guides their understanding of the world and their place in it. If the Aboriginals leave, what goes away with them is the harmonious existence of humans in nature, something that the white settlers could never do. Huggan and Tiffin point out that in the poem there is an 'affirmative recital of shared cultural properties that establishes clear lines of continuity between the past and the present…' and that the poem 're-establishes a connection with the land that the 'white tribe' has lost.' (Huggan 2010, 94) The lifestyle of the Aboriginals exhibited greater proximity to nature, their cultural practices were rooted in nature – this is something that the settlers could never have; their strive for development would only come at the disruption of an intimate relationship with nature.

What separates the work of Oodgeroo from that of Duffy or Lindsay is that Oodgeroo has the shared experience of colonization and she has actively worked against the discrimination faced by the Aboriginal Australians. She shares her history and identity with the Aboriginal Noonuccal tribe. She took up the name Oodgeroo Noonuccal as an expression of her cultural identity and it reflects her deep connection to her Aboriginal heritage and a desire to reclaim her indigenous identity which had been suppressed. It was a bold act of self-determination, cultural reclamation and symbolizes her enduring legacy as a leader in the Indigenous rights movement in Australia.

A severe consequence of colonization is the assimilation of cultures and identities. The traditional practices, beliefs, value systems, worldview, and ways of life are suppressed or forcibly replaced by those of the colonizers. Simply by taking away the land of Indigenous people, the colonizers were taking away age-old customs and cultural heritage. Additionally, manipulative or forceful conversions, institutionalisation, and the erasure of identity all contributed to the assimilation process. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley talks about the life of Zitkala-Sa, a Native American child who witnessed and was affected by the government's assimilationist policies which forbade them to practice their religious traditions or speak in their Native tongue. She even talks about how the missionaries cut her hair, which went against the laws of her tribe where only mourners or cowards get their hair chopped. (Stanley 1994, 66-67). Healy quotes the psychologist Erik Erikson, saying that some periods in history have 'identity vacua' and this happens even more to people who are threatened and have to spend their lives in anxiety and dread. (Healy 1988, 83) It is essential to understand the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization and conscious efforts must be taken to promote the preservation of the culture, heritage and practices of the indigenous people.

The themes of displacement, loss and cultural disruption caused by colonization and subsequent industrialization is carefully portrayed in these poems. They present history from a different perspective than that of the Europeans, highlighting the invasion of settlers into pristine land and the subsequent human intervention on nature. The poems also address the erasure of indigenous cultures and voices and the struggles of indigenous people to maintain their identity and heritage. Modern-day development has always come at the expense of natural resources and the people who remain closely tied to nature. The poems call for awareness, empathy and understanding and give voice to the ones whom the colonizers wanted to suppress. What is also common between these three poems is that they evoke a sense of loss and displacement while acknowledging the importance of preserving and respecting diverse cultures, histories, and identities. Through their poignant imagery and evocative language, they leave a lasting impression on the minds of the readers and invite reflections on the complex and multifaceted issues of displacement, loss of identity, and cultural disruption in contemporary societies.

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