

BEAUTY AND THE GROTESQUE REALITY: A POSTCOLONIAL LIVES STUDY IN A HANDFUL OF POEMS

***AMIT MONDAL**

**Dept. of English, The University of Burdwan, West Bengal, India*

ABSTRACT

As a new discipline Postcolonial Studies has drawn attention because of the efforts of litterateurs from countries who were once colonised by European power, especially Britain. Postcolonial narrative is seen as a response to the colonial policies and ideologies imposed upon the natives of the colonised countries. They did not allow the natives to practice their own traditions and cultural norms. In writings of several of its practitioners such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, Gabriel Okara, A.D. Hope, Judith Wright, Standish O'Grady, we experience the relationship between the two and what situations they had to face in the act of achieving freedom. Here this paper deals with the poems written by these writers and shows how European influence destroyed the beauty of these lands and hampered the normal lives of the natives across the globe. The scenario became grotesque. But these postcolonial writers still find beauty in it. They hide this beauty behind the harsh reality implemented in the poems. In fact, their poems are composition of both. This paper seeks to assess the contributions of poetry in realising this grotesque reality and retained beauty with a background.

Key words: post-colonialism, reality, grotesque, beauty.

The trend of the twentieth century literature is considered a movement of uncovering the truth and reality of human existence and presenting it before the world. It was the time of hope for millions of people around the world because the vast majority of it including countries like India, Canada, Australia, Sri Lanka as well as most African nations gained independence from the European colonizers. At a time, for instance, the Great Britain ruled almost half of the world. After 1950s the art and literature produced in these newly independent countries has become the central object of Postcolonial Studies. The nostalgia of former beauty and glory often lead critics, thinkers, philosophers and others from wounded civilisations to analyse the representations and identity formations of the 'Occident' and the 'Orient', as explained by Edward Said in his 1978 book *Orientalism*, in

cultural and literary contexts. Today postcolonial literature has become so popular because of the contributions of theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Franz Fanon, Kwame and others who significantly explain the position of literature in relation to politics, history, philosophy and literary tradition. So much discussions have been made on the issue of postcolonial studies in terms of neocolonialism, feminism, Foucauldian discourse analysis, cultural imperialism in the age of global and information networks. But all discussions focus on a particular point and that is the act of imposing 'false consciousness' on the lives of natives and its aftermath. As a result of it the literature after 1950s presents a grotesque reality the postcolonial countries are turned into. To contextualise the term 'grotesque', it first appeared in early seventeenth century French literature where the image of grotesque was connected to the physical body. Even in the eighteenth century it was used in association with the character of physically deformed or mentally deficient. The nineteenth century literature remarkably has Frankenstein's monster carrying impression of disgust and terror in the minds of readers whereas twentieth century German as well as English grotesque representations are basically comic, surreal and nightmarish, but such representations in fact do not reflect a recognizable reality to uncover the exact condition of human existence. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Nikolai Gogol's story "The Nose", are the two best examples to show this kind of grotesque picture. Historically, the grotesque portrayal in literature proves that anything grotesque cannot be beautiful. But the second half of twentieth century changed the connotation of the term, especially in the area of postcolonial literature and it shows an awkward, distorted picture of human life and civilization along with its beauty. In other words, beauty and the natural life still remained in the postcolonial countries cannot be defined as beauty in its own term; rather it is always in association with grotesque reality. The sight of beauty-in-grotesque situation is shown very well in writings of postcolonial writers such as Derek Walcott, Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, Wole Soyinka, A.D. Hope, Judith Wright and others. Here I deal with the poems written by these postcolonial writers to analyse their present states and attitudes toward the colonizers as representatives of independent countries where beauty still exists in hidden form.

Chinua Achebe, one of the most gifted postcolonial writers in history of world literature, was born in 1930 in Southern Nigeria when British colonialism was to begin dictating the normal lives of the natives. Born at this crucial time he experienced the suffering and struggle of the Nigerians, especially the people of Igbo communities Achebe himself belonged to. Though he is basically known as a novelist his poetry also deals with the life of his country people and their horrible condition in the violent claws of colonialism, war and poverty. The best example to deal with it is Achebe's poem "Refugee Mother and Child" written during Nigerian civil war. This poem serves as a written analysis of that time period and presents a reality where mother-son relationship is affected by extreme poverty and its harsh reality as a result of postcolonial interference on the normal lives of

Nigerian and in general Africa. The strength of the poem lies in the fact that the poem is the realization of reality where the beauty of relationship is destroyed. This poem shows life of a loving mother who is trying to detach herself from her child and stops taking care of her child anymore because for the mother the act of taking care of her child cannot survive her child. But the most beautiful thing is that even though she is victimised by harsh reality she cannot escape from motherly affection for her child. The poem begins with an imagery of Madonna holding her child in her arms showing the absolute beauty of the world. The is “picture of a mother’s tenderness” that definitely points towards the secured life of Nigerian people in the lap of mother Nature who teaches them how to take care of loved ones, how to share love, how to find plenty of happiness in life. At the same time this picture paradoxically brings the note of sad, harsh life. It is the aftermath of colonialism and civil war that puts a mother into a helpless situation where “for a son she soon would have to forget”. The expressions used in the poem to describe the situation such as “odours”, “unwashed children”, “washed-out ribs”, “dried up bottoms”, “empty bellies” are clearly the grotesque presentation of reality in colonial Nigeria. It was a time when the love of a mother for her child becomes meaningless. Instead of loving their children mothers try to forget them. They make grave for their dead children to come inside. The children instead of being the subject of love become the victim of poverty and carelessness. Here harsh reality hides the real beauty of mother-son relationship. The grotesque is in its full definition when the act of childbirth is nothing but gaining a certain knowledge of death and horror. A mother helplessly dries up tears and waits for her child’s death.

*.....she held
a ghost smile between her teeth
and in her eyes the ghost of a mother’s
pride as she combed the rust-coloured
hair lift on his skull and them- (10-14)*

This ghostly imagery brings horror as well as beauty, because this imagery signifies that even though the mother is compelled not to care, but still fights for her son against adversity. In Achebe beauty also lies in the act of combining the hair of a young son as daily life rituals and at the same time it is symbolic of decorating a grave for her son. Such combination of beauty and the grotesque is the real picture of colonized countries. It would have been only beautiful if there had been no upper hand of colonizers.

Caribbean poet Derek Walcott's two poems “Ruins of a Great House” and “A Far Cry from Africa” published in his poetry collection *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960* also go back to the twilight of the British Empire and raise the question of legacy, memory and of divided loyalty. The first poem is of a great ruined house

which is the reminder of all deaths associated with it and custom of slavery. This is also a poem of Caribbean resistance against brutish colonialism now visible in the symbolic presence of the ruined house. The description of the old mansion includes “stones only” and where “moth-like girls are mixed with candle dust, /Remain to file the lizard's dragonish claws”. The poem also describes the decaying statues of angels and remains of the coaches half-buried “under the muck of cattle droppings”. The lines “ A smell of dead limes quickens the nose/ The leprosy of empire” emphasis once more on the themes of death and decay. The grotesque reality of Caribbean islands under colonialism is also expressive in the poetic description of the ruined mansion:

*But where the lawn breaks in a rash of tree
A spade below dead leaves will ring the bone
of some dead animals or human thing
Fallen from evil days, from evil times (15-18)*

The poet addresses the former explorers and poets as the “Ancestral murderers” whose involvements in the murderous abuse of the colonised people seem quite paradoxical. However the last lines suggest compassion and calmness on the part of the poet, rather than anger when he looks at the ruined house and is reminded of all the decays and deaths of colonial masters who used to live in the blood of slaves, now under graves. Walcott here makes an universal appeal to heal the hurt of history. His eyes are no longer burning with revenge, no longer “Ablaze with rage” in the thought that “some slave is rotting in this manorial lake”. He is now cool to “the coal of my compassion”, because “That Albion too was once/A colony like us”. The poet also becomes nostalgic at the thought of former beauty of Caribbean islands– birds, gardens, lovely people later turning into slaves. For the poet history exists as memories and with these memories he celebrates the resistance power of his natives that can never be enslaved. His another poem “A Far Cry from Africa” is also a cry for the lost beauty and identity. The poem is set after the Second World War against the backdrop of Mau uprising in Kenya that brought death to the Kikuyu people. The poet recollects their beautiful lands and calls it paradise but immediately saw “Corpses are scattered through a paradise”. He saw the “colonel of carrion” officiating at the putrefying flesh of the dead people like worms. The colonial murderers destroyed the beauty of the land by strewing the dead bodies across it and metaphorically brought death to the Garden of Eden. Walcott witnessed the horror that colonialism has reduced the African people to the level of beasts that ought to be hunted and killed. The poet talks about “brutish necessity” of the white masters who were so much intoxicated by conquest of colonies that they lost their sense of compassion and fellow-feeling. They do not have the sense of guilt, rather they wipe its guilt “Upon the napkins of a dirty cause”. In such harsh reality the African “gorilla” like poet “wrestles with the superman” in search of his individual identity only to be torn between the two. Walcott's takes on the African lands as paradise

undoubtedly allude to the former beauty of the continent. And now these lands of corpses question the identity of African natives.

Wole Soyinka opens up another side of reality Africans had to face in his poem “Telephone Conversation” that rests upon the conflict between the poet-cum-protagonist and the absurdity of racism. This poem brings the racial prejudices prevalent in the West at that time. Here the poet is looking for an apartment to rent in London. To get that he is engaged in a telephone conversation with a white landlady. The important thing here to note is that being a black he needs to make “self-confession” that he is black even though he has done nothing wrong; he just needs a place to live. The lady is shocked to hear from a black; she takes some time to recover. The racism reached to such a level in white colonizers that being a coloured man the poet simply had to ask for permission to meet the young lady because the lady’s refusal would be a “wasted journey” for the poet. Soyinka is classic at his expressions showing “Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled/Cigarette-holder pipped(8-9)” as the mark of civilized people and that civilization can question an African “HOW DARK?”, “ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?”. Soyinka is critical of the true nature of the westerners. He calls public telephone booth “hide-and-speak” because here he can hide his real expression from the person he is speaking to. He simplifies the reality in his next conversation by playing a joke on the landlady. He ridiculously gives his identity as “west African sepiia” written in passport, but it is not clear for the lady yet. He explains her that he is like “brunette”, i.e. the black colour of a woman’s hair. Interestingly both of them maintain politeness in the whole conversation as both of them are hypocritical. Politeness and beauty of heart are the weapons of a good person but the politeness of the lady is something superficial. The other side poet uses politeness to get the upper hand over her by describing the various dark shades of his body parts—“Palm of my hand”, “soles of my feet” are “peroxide blond”. Soyinka defends Africa and its people in closing lines of the poem by putting a question before the “Madam” that “wouldn’t you rather/See for yourself?”. Beauty of the poem again lies in the fact that the poet does not insult the landlady or western people in general, but he is only criticizing their attitudes toward African people, even though he is himself insulted by her. Similarly African poet Gabriel Okara's “Once Upon a Time” is all about memory of the past, nostalgia of natural life, regret for the lost glory and realisation of the truth at the background when traditional African culture encountered the waves of western lifestyle. The poem is written just like a dramatic monologue in which a father talks to his son about a distant long past when African people used to live their own natural lives and how they have changed their way of life at the present time. The father regretfully recollects the time before British colonial interference when “they used to laugh with their hearts/and laugh with their eyes”. It was the time when “they used to shake hands with their hearts”. The poetic expressions such as “only laugh with their teeth”, “ice-block-cold eyes”, “shake hands without hearts”, “hands search my empty pockets” suggest the

falseness in modern society very much contradictory to that of past. In this real life experiences the father has learned how to “wear many faces”, how to behave differently and to have different attitudes in different situations. The African people are living like actors holding multiple faces such as “homeface”, “officeface”, “streetface”, “hostface”, “cocktailface”. They show smile in their faces while they are dead inside. There is no connection between their actions and feelings. They say one thing and mean other. The poet compares “laugh with their teeth” with “a snake's bare fangs” implying the deceitful personality. This is absolutely a picture of grotesque reality seen in Africa. Here people do not live, rather they pretend to live. The poet takes British colonialism responsible for this unexpected change. Hence, the father wants to “unlearn” all those things he has learned over the years and wants to be innocent like “once upon a time” he used to be. While interpreting the devastating impact of western culture’s encounter with native culture Okara indirectly celebrates their own origin, culture and tradition.

The picture is same even in Australia, one of British colonies. Australia is a young country and it has beautiful location, geography and complexities of urban living. To see Australia from postcolonial perspective, now the beauty and the uniqueness of this country are mixed with a sense of terror. Poetry plays an important part to define Australia in its original nature and the change it is coming across because of rapid urbanisation. Australian writers A. D. Hope and Judith Wright writing on postcolonial background present the lives the Australian people are living. In his poem “Australia” Hope calls Australia a monotonous and dreary place where it is very hard to survive. Australia, says Hope, is the young and “the emptiest” country which is not overpopulated, so to speak. The poet implies his negative attitude by comparing Australia with “a breast still tender but within the womb is dry”. He tries to point out that even though Australia is a young country, inside is full of dullness and boredom. There is no individualism throughout Australia; there is only gathering of “monotonous tribes” marching in the same direction without “emotions”, but only with “superstitions of younger lands”. Hope calls Australia a land “without songs, architecture, history”; it is just like “a vast parasite robber-state” where the inhabitants who imitate European cultures, manners, attitudes “drains” the country's vast resources. To Hope it is “The Arabian desert of the human mind” awaiting the arrival of a prophet. In this land one can hear “the chatter of cultured apes”. Even in the poem “Standardisation” he speaks of the ills of mechanised modern society and gives an warning against complete standardisation. He shows the picture of modern Australia—“the house not made with hands”, “vacuum cleaners”, “tinned soup”, “motor cars”, “anonymous faces plastered with her smile” and is conscious of the terrible future due to this “standardisation of the Race”. The poet alludes to the ‘Original Sin’ committed by Adam and Eve that caused the fall of all human beings; and now the endless mechanisation is sure to destroy the whole nation. In spite of that Hope's love for his

country let him think the positive side of the country. He tells us of the mass production occurring in nature. He says:

*For there is no manufacturer competes
With her in the mass production of shapes and things.
Over and over she gathers and repeats
the cast of a face, a million butterfly wings.
She does not tire of the pattern of a rose.
Her oldest tricks still catch us with surprise.(21-26)*

Australia despite being influenced by European cultures and lifestyle retains her true nature and origin. The same does happen in poem “Australia” that really explains in depth the beauty of Australia. To Hope Australia means a country both new and old, both a European colony and a natural individual, both wild and mechanised. The poet expresses his love for Australia in insulting way. In “The Death of the Bird” also Hope talks about colonial influence still dictating the people of Australia even in twentieth century. Here he used the metaphor of bird to show the estrangement that is the feature of Australian society. Every season the bird migrates from one place to another for food, breeding. The bird does have her flight against all adversities. But the reality is that there must be the last flight for the bird when she would not return. Nature would be passive to her. Poet is actually talking about the death of the bird. The nostalgic flight of the bird may refer to the exiled Australians who still think that their mother home is England. They live in this country as exiles. They love this country but also they love their mother country. They keep on migrating from Australia to England. Hope criticizes the sense of going home while the home has become different to them. The poet connotes the mortality of human beings using bird metaphor and is very much conscious of the fact that “For every bird there is this last migration”. In association with this Judith Wright's poem “Woman to Man” arouses fear of the colonial encounter between the two nations. Here a woman is holding “the selfless, shapeless seed” in her womb to germinate. The seed is germinating fast evolving into human shape. But “this in no child with a child’s face”. The poet presenting this kind of awkward image simply questions the cultural production in Australia.

Irish poet Standish O'Grady's poem “Winter in Lower Canada” can be said a further explanation of A.D. Hope's poem “The Death of the Bird”. In his poem O'Grady shows the adversities and difficulties he had to face due to his immigration to Canada. He talks about the landscapes and the wildlife in Canada to imply that apart from human world, natural world also creates problems for the people who emigrate to other places. To escape the war O'Grady emigrated to Canada only to find that that was not the place to have an easy life; that was a

“barren waste”, “unprofitable strand” and also an “unproductive land”. On this land grows “hemlocks”, a poisonous plant. Winter nights bring “frozen air” that “Can metamorphose dark brown hares to white!” (3). Trees are cut down as lumber. Adversity teaches the bear to satisfy his hunger by licking his own paw. The poet also sees the harsh life people spend in this “wild wilderness”. He notices the “lank Canadian” lighting the fire to keep himself warm and others “retire” around the lighted stoves. They tell stories which are good only to “regale” buffaloes. The poet is very contemptuous of these people.

*Their only pride a cariole and bells!
To mirth or mourning, thus by folly led,
To mix in pleasure or to chaunt the dead!
To seek the chapel prostrate to adore,
Or leave their father's coffins at the door! (22-26)*

The poet also criticizes the habit they practice in daily lives—talking, smoking, spitting, dancing and sleeping. O'Grady is not happy with Canadian lifestyles. Here “ Brave Greenland winters” last for seven long months every year covering the lands by snow. But in this harsh life the beauty of this snow-clad landscape cannot escape the eyes of the poet. He is fascinated with this beauty and poetically explains it as “Ice-wrought tapestry of gorgeous white”. Still the poet does not consider Canada an ideal place to live; every moment you have to struggle for survival. He can understand the importance of being in his motherland, i.e. Ireland. The poet holds a negative attitude towards those people from postcolonial countries who still imitate European cultures and traditions and go for them in hope of better lives. But this hope only brings depression for them.

To sum up, postcolonial writers act as a collective force trying to give a feedback to those European colonizers who used to define the people of their former colonies as savage, backward, uncivilised and so on. By the early twentieth century so many anti-colonial liberation movements were taking place all over countries of Africa, Asia, South America. It was the second half of the twentieth century classic postcolonial texts were published. Along with novel and drama, poetry is also important in postcolonial literature that defines the movements and makes way for the nations to realise the truth hidden in the domain of colonialism so far. And that is why the writers like Achebe, Soyinka, A.D. Hope, Okara, O'Grady and others tell their own stories from their own perspectives. They show the grotesque picture of colonialism and its aftermath still relevant in these newly independent countries. Their poems explore the question of identity. Apart from analysing the awkward situations in their lives, they also celebrate their power of resistance, honesty and the spirit of patriotism. They find beauty in the presence of harsh lives. These poets criticise the western influence on them and in other way they love all

those things rooted in their motherlands. The discussed poems can also be studied further as a part of protest literature.

REFERENCES

1. Achebe, Chinua. *Collected Poems*. New York: Anchor Books, 2004.
2. Walcott, Derek. *Collected Poems 1948-2013*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.
3. Hope, A.D. *Collected Poems 1930-1970*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1977.
4. Moore, Gerald. *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry*. London: Penguin Classics, 2007.
5. Soyinka, Wole. "Telephone Conversation." *Allpoetry.com*. 1963. <http://allpoetry.com/poem/10379451-Telephone-Conversation-by-Wole-Soyinka>. 21 Jan. 2015.