



PARALLEL PLIGHTS: ECOCIDE AND GENOCIDE IN JACK DAVIS' "FOREST GIANT"

Susan Alexander

Assistant Professor, P.G Dept. of English, St Cyril's College, Adoor Kerala

Abstract

To understand the culture of a nation one must look from within that culture. Australian Aboriginal literature helps one to understand this basic premise of anthropology. An understanding of aboriginal literature produced in Australia helps to understand and appreciate the culture of the indigenous people while simultaneously they also reveal the changes the nation has undergone since colonization. They are not produced by outsiders or observers but by those who have lived through these experiences and the creative act of writing becomes an effort to impart an understanding and awareness of the experiences of the indigenous people. Immigrant people have always altered the life of the autochthonous people and a major part of Australian Aboriginal poetry deals with it. Parallel patterning of events consequential to colonization can be found in the history of every nation subjugated by invaders. Jack Davis' "Forest Giant" is a short poem which details within its ambit the destruction of the environment or ecocide and the decline in the population of the aboriginals due to genocide. The yoking of cultural and environmental history serves to understand the complementary perspectives of aboriginal life and environmental history of the nation.

Keywords: Ecocide, genocide, environmental history, Dreamtime, animism, Nyoongar, colonization, aboriginal, logging.



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The relationship that aboriginal people had with their land and environment forms the theme of much aboriginal poetry produced in Australia. Despite activism aimed at promoting an understanding of this relationship, it is an acknowledged fact that scholarly emphasis eludes this arena leaving a lacuna or academia still in its pupilage. According to John Charles Ryan:

“mediated by typographical conventions but retaining traditional story telling modes, aboriginal poetry also preserves ecological knowledge, reflects environmental concerns, and lodges ecopolitical critiques of land related issues, including the disintegration of bio cultural heritage.” (*Humanities*938).

The paper Parallel Plights: Ecocide and Genocide in Jack Davis's "Forest Giant" is an attempt to compare the condition of the aboriginals who were dispossessed of their land, environment, and culture with the Australian terrain erased off its green aura.

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Virginal Australia was brought to the focus of the world in the year 1770 with the landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay. The intense desire to rule a land immense in its riches found the declaration of the land as “terra nullius” and as the possession of King George III. The Australian landscape began to bear all signs of colonialism and ecological imperialism. It was the mapping of unknown territories and searching of products that could be commandeered. With it began a cultural and biotic invasion, ecocide and genocide unparalleled in the history of Australia.

Archeological evidence establish that aboriginal culture had existed for 60,000 years. Aboriginals themselves trace their existence back to the Dream time- the aboriginal understanding of the world and its creation. Dreamtime or Dreaming, to them, was the beginning of the world when their ancestors rose to the surface of the world from supernatural beings or totemic ancestors which often resembled creatures or plants. It is thus the oldest surviving culture and scientific evidence dates its back to 1, 20,000 to1, 50,000 years. Though they comprise of about 500-600 groups, spiritual beliefs, ties to the land, and colonial invasion form the seam that unifies them. Before colonization, the Australian aboriginal population remained almost steady at 3, 00,000 for thousands of years. This may be one of the reasons why the famous French anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss regarded them as “intellectual aristocrats” contrary to them often being portrayed as barbarians (Cashmore 1). The history of world’s first mariners and artists goes back to the Aboriginals. With the onset of colonization, their population started dwindling and culture endangered. The battle of spearheads against fire arms was deadly. But more dangerous was the very breath of the Europeans which contained deadly organisms that the Aboriginals fell prey to. Over the years population declined and according to Belinda Wheeler reached its lowest ever in 1920. The sole inhabitants were reduced to the status of a minority.

Paralleling this decline in the population of the Aboriginals, Australia also witnessed the loss of nearly 40% of its forests. The sixth largest nation in the world and as occupying an entire continent, forest degradation brought massive changes in the biota of the nation. Jack Davis’ poem “Forest Giant” captures in a mere 15 lines the plight of trees and Aboriginals in Australia. An advocate of Aboriginal rights, poet, playwright and activist, Jack Davis was born in 1917 in Perth. He belonged to the Nyoongar tribe and lived in Western Australia which cultivated in him an attachment to the natural environment with the “lofty redgum and jarrah trees anew bird’s nest, swooping magpies and bush animal or reptile track across

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the path through the bush” (*A Boy’s Life* 11). His creative expressions delved into colonization and its impact on the environment too. “Forest Giant” from *Black Life* is a direct address to an ancient gum tree and embodies the spirit of animism where even nonliving things are seen as animate. Thus even the soil throbs with life to Davis. The animist framework of Australian Aboriginal mythology sees the soul of plants and animals and human beings as existing even before the corporal reality. These final souls which then took human shape is supposed to act as the steward of the natural world. Davis sees this giant tree as an equal of man. The tree stands “reaching the sky”. Man stands to protect them. The animism becomes explicit when he talks of the soil and the tree as “your roots in cadence/ with the heartbeat of the soil” (*Little Book of Trees* 4). According to Ryan this implies:

“awareness of the material and energetic flows between abiotic (e.g. soil, rocks, air) and biotic (e.g. humans, birds, trees) inhabitants of the land in the context of Nyoongar (South West of Western Australia) cosmology. Just as the tree has a body so too does the soil have a heart-a turn – of-phrase that is not intended by the writer as a symbolic flourish or metaphysical abstraction, but as a spiritual and ecological reality” (945).

Such a paradigm does not visualize natural beings as mere objects for human use. The veneration of trees in Hinduism may be recalled in this context. Here, it may be said that Davis functions as an animist who according to Harvey are “people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship to others” (xi).

The giant tree is a reminder of the history of the intense logging in Australia. Australia in the late 18th century was a nation whose 30 % of landmass was covered by forests (Barson 2000). Land clearing for agriculture ensued soon after the first settlement. Rapid clearing of land was necessitated by Crown Land Alienation Act (1861) which penalized the failure to develop the land. Dispossession of the indigenous Australians was an offshoot of this clearing. Western Australia experienced its most rapid deforestation between 1920 and 1980 which coincides Belinda Wheeler’s observation that the Aboriginal population reached its nadir in 1920. Huge trees which were looked upon with wonder and which took “32 of my boyish steps to circle its sprawling girth” (*A Boy’s Life* 82) fell into the hands of the logging industry. Now he sees in the tree which has escaped the settle massacre, his sibling and addresses it directly:

You have stood there for centuries
Arms gaunt reaching for the sky

(*Little Book of Trees 4*)

In surviving the ravages caused by the white settlers, the tree resembles the aboriginals who have escaped their onslaught. It somehow escaped death and is like the aboriginals who escaped genocide. “Genocide refers to the intention to destroy a whole or substantial part of a group physically, because they are members of that group. (Palmer 1). Shooting black became the motto and duty of the whites. The policy of extermination made use of poison too. Like animals being killed for sport, aboriginals were killed (44). Specific instances of decline in aboriginal population is cited by Palmer where he gives an account of the accurate number of Aboriginals who attended coroborrees or festive meetings. The aborigines were kept in a state of terror and powerlessness by the use of violent discipline. They were treated as dogs instilling in them the belief that the colonizers wielded the power of life and death. “They regarded their doom as inevitable and bore their wrongs in silence” (qtd. in Palmer 108). In the words of Rosemary Berg:

With the arrival of the British colonizers in Western Australia, the Nyoongar people suffered a cultural shock so devastating that they would never recover the equilibrium of their hunter gatherer and forager lifestyle. They were to be at the mercy of the white invaders and their policies of control, from” amity and kindness” to the more severe codes of policy-making like cultural genocide and imprisonment (mainly for aboriginal men). They were prohibited from practicing their culture and from speaking their language. (207)

Davis yokes cultural history with environmental history as he parallels the plight of the giant tree and his own group. Having escaped death the poet shares the trees’ sorrow:

Now you and I
bleed in sorrow and in silence
for what had once been (*Little Book of Trees 4*)

The reason for their sorrow is:

But they destroyed the others
Down the slope
And on the valley floor (*Little Book of Trees 4*)

Just as the Aboriginals could not resist the terrible diseases that the settlers brought with them, the native Australian flora and fauna also were replaced by invasive species. The hard hoofs of the introduced animals damaged the earth and soft shoots which were native and undamaged by marsupial feet died inside the earth. Invasive plants swept out native species and according to Palmer “in many areas where trees were not dense, the land was not cleared but trees were ringbarked in order to kill it or check rapid growth” (91). It was also done for improving fruit production. Similarly the explanation for the destruction of the indigenous people was that they were barriers to economic development and modernization. Davis vehemently attacks the settlers calling them rapists:

While rapists still
Stride across
And desecrate the land (*Little Book of Trees*4)

The life of the Nyoongar community like that of any other Australian aboriginal community revolved round their land which they considered as their origin, sustenance, and destiny. Their way of life was based on their relationship with the environment. The history of Australia’s colonization is the history of aboriginal genocide and environmental degradation. “Australia in the twenty- first century faces the increasingly severe environmental effects of colonization with its commercial production and loss of the knowledge of the landscape” (Pettit 54). The lamentation of the cultural and environmental loss of Australia makes the poem a distinct one in Australian literature.

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