Lament for the Dorsets: An Eco-critical and Postcolonial Analysis

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Abstract
The whole world remained intact until one part of the human community invaded the other part under the name of colonization. The colonizers occupied the lands of the natives and instilled their own culture, language, art, values and beliefs upon the later. Every community survived with the consciousness of their ‘self’ and the arrival of colonists transmuted the conscious ‘self’ into the ‘Other’ within their own community. The advent of the colonists distorted the native culture and reconstructs it with the culture of their own. This distortion is not confined only to culture, ideologies and beliefs, but it extends to the natural environment of the natives. The extinction rate of the flora and fauna increased with the advent of the colonists. For example, in India the colonists destroyed huge areas of forests for tea and coffee plantations. This research paper aims at giving voice for ‘Nature’ which has been seriously affected and marginalized by colonization through the poem, ‘Lament for the Dorsets’ written by the Canadian poet, Al Purdy.

Keywords: Eco-critical, Postcolonial, Lament for the Dorset, Al Purdy, Marginalization.

Introduction
The whole world remained intact until one part of the human community invaded the other part under the name of colonization. The colonizers had occupied the lands of the natives and instilled their own culture, language, art, science, values and beliefs upon the later. Every community survived with the consciousness of their ‘self.’ The arrival of colonists transmuted this conscious ‘self’ of the natives into the ‘other’ within their own community. Whatever was considered ‘indigenous’ to the natives was made ‘strange’ by colonization. This could be exemplified by our younger generation’s reputation towards their ‘mother tongue’ and ‘English’. The advent of the colonists distorted the native culture and reconstructs it with the culture of their own. This distortion is not confined only to culture, ideologies and beliefs, but it extends to the natural environment of the natives. During this post-colonial era, a lot of space is given for the indigenous people to express about their lost ‘Self’ through mediums like literature, media etc. Though, it is not fully revealed, at least the present generation knows that they had been deformed by the colonists in the past.

Nature remains silent even today about the distortion that happened to it because of the arrival of colonists. The extinction rate of the flora and fauna increased with the advent of the colonists. For example, in India the colonists destroyed huge areas of forests for tea and coffee plantations. Colonization includes within it an ecological imperialism. Alfred W. Crosby in his book Ecological Imperialism (2016) says, “European’s displacement and replacement of the native peoples in the temperate zones was more a matter of biology than of military conquest.” Thus, this research paper aims at giving voice for ‘Nature’ which has been seriously affected and marginalized by colonization through the poem, ‘Lament for the Dorsets’ written by the Canadian poet, Al Purdy.

Al Purdy, a Canadian Poet. He had little formal education and belongs to the era of Great Depression and World Wars. He served in the Royal Canadian Air Force and after the war his career as a writer begins. His literary works include thirty-nine books of poetry, one novel and two volumes of memoirs. Most of his writings came out during his travel and he is popularly called as the “Travel poet.” Lament for the Dorsets was written during his visit to the Baffin Island during the summer of 1965.

This poem describes the extinction of the Dorsets due to the arrival of the colonists. Dorsets, an indigenous group that existed in Newfoundland, Greenland, Baffin Island, and the extreme north of Quebec,
Canada between 1000 B.C and 1500 A.D. Al Purdy commences this poem by furnishing information about the remnants of the Dorset culture which includes: uncovered bones, carvings, and small tools of the Dorset people. Following this, the poet hints at the Inuit stories about the Dorset people who bravely fought against the Viking invaders and about the Dorset hunters who were remarkably gigantic and strong enough to kill the polar bears.

Purdy also specifies that the present-day Inuit hunters have the traces of these Dorset hunters’ techniques and valour. Purdy says that, these Dorsets were unusually strong to pull their own sleds. But, the colonists used dogs to perform the task. Purdy continues to explain about the problems faced by the Dorset community especially, starvation because of the non-availability of Seals, which migrated to other places because of the changing climatic conditions. In this way Purdy explains about the climate change that affected these indigenous people who depend on the nature for their food and other basic needs. Purdy also observes that, these Dorsets would not have thought about these colonists who will use advanced technical weapons in the future instead of the spears and harpoons used by the natives and would create an imbalance in the food chain. Likewise, the modern people would not have imagined about these Dorsets who depend on (Glowing) lamps made from animal fat to keep themselves warm.

Al Purdy continues to contemplate on the reasons behind the Dorsets’ extinction, and he doubts whether they were aware of their imminent end. Purdy then describes about a last man in the Dorset culture, who was sitting in his tent with a lamed leg. Purdy even names the person as Kudluk. Kudluk is carving an ivory swan for his dead granddaughter. Purdy then narrates Kudluk’s chiselling and converting the idea of a swan into an ivory figurine. The last section of the poem reports the death of Kudluk’s after completing his swan figurine. Being lonely, Kudluk succumbs to the freezing climate. Purdy concludes the poem with an idea that, even the creator of art might leave this world, but, his art remains forever with the lines, “After 600 years / the ivory thought / is still warm.”

Colonialism has annihilated a lot of territories all over the world and one such territory is the habitat of the Dorsets in Canada and Greenland. Masilamani in his article, “A study on Al Purdy’s Lament for the Dorsets as an elegy of unique and extinct civilization of the Dorsets” exhibits how the Dorset community surrendered to the advancement of the colonizers and ended its existence due to the cultural distortion made by the colonizers. This research article differs in a way that, it explains how colonization has distorted nature and its accessories under the name of trade, civilization and exploration.

At the beginning of this world, nothing existed except ‘Nature.’ Whatever is made by human beings after that is termed as ‘artificial.’ An article named, “Human population growth and extinction” in Center for Biological Diversity says that, human beings in order to make life comfortable with regard to their environment made certain changes around them. While making these advancements, they modified nature and even exploited it to the core. When a certain raw material is exhausted in a particular region, human beings searched for them in other areas which are situated in faraway locations. This started in the name of ‘trade’ and ends in huge culture and nature exploitation. In this poem Lament for the Dorsets, it is evident from the portrayal of the Dorset culture by Al Purdy that, they depended on the nature and lead a sustainable existence. It is expressed through the lines, “talked to spirits of earth and water.” It also proves that these people lead an Eco-centric lifestyle. Eco-centric life signifies that, they lead a sustainable life with the available resources in their vicinity. The noun ‘spirits’ in the line stands for an invisible superior authority which is palpable by the Dorset habitat in the nature around them. This further unravels the ideology of ‘Nature Worship’ followed by these Dorsets.

They were strong enough to kill large animals with their physical strength and the available weapons in their vicinity. This is exhibited through the lines “so large they broke the backs of bears.” Every living thing is an important component in Food Chain. If any living thing is going to be vanished from this world, then it is going to affect the other living thing and it is going to affect the whole food chain. Hunting for necessity is different from hunting for fun and trade. The colonizers used advanced weapons and the hunted animals were used for commercial purposes. The colonizers were evasive when it comes to the sustainable use of nature. In this poem, Dorsets killing the bears could be considered as a defensive strategy and not something which was done by the colonizers for entertainment.

Al Purdy exhibits the over-dependent nature of the colonists and optimal use of nature by the Dorsets through the following lines, “The big men with clever fingers / who had no dogs and hauled their sleds” (14-15). The native Dorsets pulled their sledge with their hands but, the colonists who came used dogs to pull...
the sledges. The Colonists followed “Anthropocentrism” where the humans were considered as the centre and nature is considered as elements that assists the life of human beings. On contrary, the Dorsets followed “Eco-centrism” a term conceived by Aldo Leopold, where nature is in the center and humans conserved nature (Wikipedia.org).

......killers of seal
they couldn’t compete with little men
who came from the west with dogs
Or else in a warm climatic cycle
the seals went back to cold waters
and the puzzled Dorsets scratched their heads
with hairy thumbs around 1350 A.D (18-24).

These lines explain further how the Dorset habitat succumbs to the technically advanced colonizers and how colonization acts as a threat for the natural environment. An article named, “The Fur Trade” published in Milwaukee Public Museum website says that, the natural food chain is disturbed when the colonists started killing Seals for leather, fat and other commercial purposes. The above mentioned lines also depict the origin of Climate change, which is a major environmental threat today. Climate change affected the Dorsets indirectly, where the optimal temperature for a Seal to live is disturbed and they start migrating to distant lands.

Animal migration is natural, and it is a cycle. It becomes a problem when the Seals permanently alter their habitat to another place. From the context of the poem, it is evident that it a permanent migration and not a temporary one. Scientific American website says that, Seals have blubber (fat) in their body which makes them to endure extreme cold and due to this feature it can’t withstand the extreme heat. Everything in nature is made for a reason. The Dorsets depend on the Seals for their food and fuel (fat from these animals used for lamps). Before the arrival of colonists, the Dorsets too killed Seals but for their need and not for trade.

The natives were confused because, before the arrival of the colonists they use to get Seals very easily, but the advent of the Colonists and the following climate change made them to disappear forever and left all the Dorset in a perplexed state. This is expressed in the poem as “What’s wrong? What happened? / Where are the seals gone?” (28-29). These lines also depict the innocence of the Dorsets. They were unaware about the climate change which has transmuted the natural conditions of their habitat. This transmutation had its impact not only in the disappearance of the Seals, but also the disintegration of the Dorset community on a whole. The irony is, the Dorsets were not responsible for this climatic change, but, they suffer the consequences of it which was done by the colonizers.

......Twentieth century people
apartment dwellers
executives of neon death
war makers with things that explode
—they have never imagined us in their future
how could we imagine them in the past
squatting among the moving glaciers
six hundred years ago
with glowing lamps? (31-39)

In the above lines, Al Purdy compares the Dorset community which endorsed an ‘Eco-centric’ life with the twentieth century people who embraces ‘Anthropocentrism.’ The poet was displeased with the lifestyle of the modern people who use anti-natural elements like neon and explosives. Lenntech website says that neon is the second-lightest noble gas in reddish-orange color and it is used in lamps for advertising. The same website says, ‘This gas is inert and classified as a simple asphyxiant. Inhalation in excessive concentrations can result in dizziness, nausea, vomiting, loss of consciousness and death.”

The detonation of atom bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Second World War were the concrete examples of the fatal nature of explosives. The irony is that, human community knows that neon and explosives can create destruction to their lives, but, in spite of all these things they want to harm themselves and Mother Nature. Dorset habitat which leads an eco-centric life is entirely different from that of these modern ‘self-destructors.’ Dorsets used glowing lamps for which they get raw materials from the Seals and other
objects in their domain, which is in contrary to the modern people. It is evident from the poem that, all the utensils used by the Dorset community were in order to fulfill their need and not for their extravagance.

Al Purdy conveys the gap between the Dorsets and the modern people beautifully through this poem. The line, “they have never imagined us in their future” brings in the mindset of the modern people who live reluctant to a sustainable utility of nature. This line also depicts the idea that, the Dorsets were considered only as an object of eccentricity and entertainment like a seal or bear. Dorsets were a part of nature and the modern people or the colonizers exploits them and doesn’t want to include them in their extravagant life. Al Purdy then explains the innocent nature of the Dorsets who were not prudent enough to predict the advent of the colonists who will make their life into extinction.

Al Purdy constantly emphasizes the difference between the Dorset’s ‘Eco-centric’ mindset and the colonists’ ‘Anthropocentric’ mindset throughout the poem. It is evident from the poem that along with culture, nature has been distorted by the colonists. One important observation in this poem is, the life of Dorsets cannot be set apart from the invisible nature. Both the Dorsets and the nature were indivisible and the destruction of one thing destroys the other unconsciously. It is perceived from the poem that the Dorsets were innocent, unaware and tolerant towards the artificial technologies used by the colonists. At the same time, nature too was innocent and tolerant towards everything that is done against it. Exploitation of nature expanded with colonization. Like the Dorset community, Colonialism has annihilated and deformed a lot of communities all over the world. The colonists and the modern human communities were egocentric and unaware of the fact, that destruction of one part in this world destroys the other part either directly or indirectly. It is perceptible from the prevailing climatic change which affects each and every part of this earth at large.

References


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