

The Creative Launcher

Journal Home URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Issue: Vol. 7 & Issue 3, (June, 2022)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on: 30 June 2022

Peer Reviewed & Open Access: Yes

Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.53032/issn.2455-6580>

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Article History: Complete article received: 25 May 2022 | Revised article received: 4 May 2022 | Accepted: 10 June 2022 | First Published: 30 June 2022

☞ Research Article

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Painful Landloss and Homeless Existence in Select Indigenous Novels

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2022.7.3.06>

Pages: 42-49

Abstract

Indigenous communities around the world have suffered in countless ways at the hands of the settler colonists and the mainstream communities. One of the major issues faced by these communities is loss of traditional lands. The natives were not only deprived of their access to their traditional lands but were also forcibly removed from there and later deprived of their rightful claim over these land parcels. The native understanding of land as a non-commodity that could never be bartered or traded contrasted directly with the European sense of land as a

tradable commodity. The rate at which indigenous communities lost their lands is startling, especially in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Literary representations are one of the many ways the people tried to keep their memories of the lands intact for successive generations and the reading public. The present paper is an attempt to understand the painful reality of landloss as represented in four indigenous novels taken from different corners of the world.

Keywords: Indigenous Literatures, Landloss, Settler Colonialism, Land and identity, Community life, Native Displacement.

Land is a crucial aspect of an individual's identity. It assumes bigger proportions when it represents a society. The fact that every person's identity is tied to the land of birth attests to this fact. What happens to the identity of a community when external forces evict the native community from the land that had been their home since time immemorial? What happens to their claims over the landmass when the settler colonialists exert extraordinary power over the people of the soil denying the rightful owners any claim? What happens to the future generations of these indigenous peoples when they are removed from their land and stripped of the associated identity?

Indigenous communities had endured countless atrocities against their being and in the 21st century, the world is coming to a just conclusion that these pre-historic communities around the world are the rightful owners of their respective lands and are subjects of colonisation through the centuries. The 20th century, especially the first few decades, was a period of heavy trauma for the indigenous communities. When the Native Americans were losing their land and livelihood in North America, the Aborigines of Australia were losing their children, resulting in lost identities. When the African tribes were losing their lives to protect their land and culture from the western powers, aided by their own 'post-colonial' rulers, the very few indigenous people of Europe were finding themselves homeless. When the indigenous people of South America were struggling to continue their cultural practices, the first communities of Asia were struggling against the 'mainstream' communities.

While the independence movements around the world helped in restoring sense in regions like Asia and Africa, in settler colonies like America and Australia, the native is the traumatized, stigmatized and marginalized Caliban whose dreams of the ships departing are long lost while more and more Prosperos claim the land as their own.

The literatures of these people – variously referred to as Indigenous Literature, Native Writings, First Nations Literature, Adivasi Writings, Tribal Writings, and the like – the body of writings by the original inhabitants of their respective homelands, represent the trials and tribulations of the natives, who live as the marginalised minorities. This paper is an attempt to read some literary representations of indigenous landloss.

The United Nations Economic and Social Council marks land as one of the vital elements in the sustenance of the indigenous communities of the world. It declares:

Land and natural resources are the most fundamental concerns for indigenous peoples around the world. Besides the question of self-determination, the access to land and control over it and its resources are central for indigenous peoples throughout the world. Indigenous peoples depend on it for their material and cultural survival. In order to survive, indigenous peoples and their communities need to be able to own, use, conserve and organize their land and resources . . . Indigenous claims [over land] have generally been negated by applying various versions of the principle of terra nullius. (2)

The paper uses four novels to illustrate literary representation of indigenous landloss. *Yawar Fiesta* (1941) is the debut novel of Peruvian novelist Jose Maria Arguedas of Quechuan heritage. Literally meaning “Blood Festival”, the novel documents the clash of cultures – that of the Spanish settlers and the indigenous Quechauns, especially over the conduct of the bull-taming festival. Noted Kenyan Gikuyu writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's debut work *Weep Not, Child* (1964) documents the Kenyan independence movement as it portrays the power relations between the landless Gikuyus, the exploitative black landowners, and the colonial white masters. Considered a modern postcolonial epic, the novel is a *bildungsroman* of Njoroge, a Gikuyu boy, coming to terms with colonialism, western education, traditions and landloss.

Native American Chippewa writer Louise Erdrich is an important member of the Native American Renaissance of the late 20th century. Her novel, *Tracks* (1988) is an account of the Chippewan dilemma regarding Europeanisation, aptly represented by the dual narrators – Nanapush the community elder and Pauline the young modern. The story of Lulu, told by the competing voices of the two narrators bring into focus Native American existence in the 20th century. *Kocharethi* (1998) is the debut novel of the Mala Arayan writer from southern India, Narayan. It documents the changing tides of the Arayar lives around the period of Indian independence through the lives of three generations of the natives. The fleeting changes experienced by the community and the deterioration of traditional practices are in focus.

In *Yawar Fiesta*, Arguedas builds on the ancient Quechan myth that the Wachok— ancient demigod heroes— “allocated lands to the four ayllus.” This arrangement made the Chaupi and K’ollana ayllus receive grazing lands called moyas while the other ayllus received “good warm lands” (165). But things change forever when the settlers arrive. “The plundering of the ayllus began. With the authorities’ backing, the mistis began with the K’ollana neighbourhood. K’ollana had good corn, barley, and wheat fields. The judges and the notaries signed papers of every description; that sufficed” (6).

Arguedas notes that “the Indians in K’ollana seem to have been dispossessed of their lands and transformed into share-tenants or day laborers for the mestizos and mistis” (151). The Indians stop this rut through concerted community efforts, but by that time “the mistis had already become the owners of almost all of the cropland; by then, the K’ollanas and the K’ayuas were reduced to being mere field hands for the important people” (6).

Naturally, the fight for land led to the fight for water. “How many times have the mistis gone to the water distribution place, cracked their bullwhips, and taken staffbearing leaders off

to be shut up in jail!” (7). The traditional societal elders – the staffbearers – had lost their control over the resources to the mistis and mestizos.

Fencing of lands is another colonial enterprise to grab lands from the natives. In *Yawar Fiesta*, the whites “began to put up stone walls and fence off the free puna [highlands] with thorn bushes and stones . . . [and] draw up papers . . . swearing that they were the owners of this spring, of that grazing land, of the fields with the best pastures, nearest the town” (12) and a judge would turn up to say: “Punacumunkuna: Senor Santos is the owner of these grasslands; all of it – hills, dales, springs, and all – belongs to him” (13). As Patricia Seed points out, fencing is an age-old tradition of land-grabbing: “enclosing land by fences or hedges meant establishing specifically individual ownership . . . fencing legitimately created exclusive private property ownership in the New World” (20).

Religion plays a vital role in the colonial project. The Vicar in *Yawar Fiesta* legitimises land-grabbing:

The Priest put a wide silk scarf over his arms, as he did for baptisms, looked off into the distance in every direction, and then prayed a while. Presently, as the judge had, he addressed the Indians:

‘Cumunkuna: By law Don Santos has proven that these grazing lands belong to him. Now Don Santos has proven that these grazing lands belong to him. Now Don Santos is going to be respect; he’s going to be boss of the Indians who live on these lands. God in heaven also respects law; law is for everybody the same. Cumunkuna! Let’s see you kiss Don Santos’ hand!’

And one by one, hat in hand, the comuneros went up to the new owner and kissed his hand. Out of respect for tayta priest, out of respect for Taytacha God. (13)

Having gotten the unholy authorisation, the new owner of the land would then take all the cattle on the land to the town cattlepen and through the corrupt administrators would send them off to the ‘foreign land’ for meat, thus denying the Indians of their livelihood as well.

The Indians were pushed up the mountains through the connivance of the colonisers, ayllu by ayllu, till they reached a point “up to the mountain-tops and the high plains where the dry grass is coarse and stunted and sticks to the ground like cattle ticks” (15) making cattle-rearing impossible and the Indian is left with no choice but to serve the new colonial masters as serfs.

And when they were completely destitute, without a single lamb to console them, they would stay on as herdsmen for the boss; they’d declare themselves the orphan children of the notable who had appropriated the grazing lands, and every time the señor came to visit his lands they would cry, ‘Here we are, papituy, Taytituy!’ (17)

If the Quechuan was subjugated through the unholy means, the situation across the Atlantic was no different. Ben Okri points out that Thiong’o’s *Weep Not, Child* is primarily concerned about the loss of native lands to the settlers and their stooges. He writes:

Weep Not, Child is a novel about loss. It moves through many losses, beginning with the loss of land. But land here is more than just the earth or soil, for farming and harvest. It is also the compact with ancestral deity. It is a foundation place in the long narrative

of a people from the cosmos to their place on earth. The land is in fact the myth of the people—the promised contract, what anchors them on earth and in heaven. In fact, the land is the body of the ancestral deity. To lose it is to lose connection with the gods of the people, to be unmoored and unhoused in time. (xiii-xiv)

The contrast between the native understanding of land ownership and that of the western notions is brought out through the novel. Jacobo, the white-leaning black landlord, forces Ngotho off his lands. This worries the villagers who comment that it was against their custom to ask the traditional owner to go away since the ‘sites’ cannot be sold off (65). Thiong'o also highlights how the fertile land was taken away by the Whites while the Blacks are left with the rough lots. “You could tell the land of the Black People because it was red, rough, and sickly, while the land of the white settlers was green and was not lacerated into small strips” (7).

Ngotho, the patriarch of the family in focus, is introduced as a muhoi—a landless farmer who farms and lives on the rented land. He is puzzled as to how his father became a muhoi (13). He firmly believes that ‘the promised land’ had been handed over to them by God himself. The poor farmer wants to “cry and harm [his] body to drive away the curse that removed [them] from the ancestral lands.” He wants “to go back to the soil and court it to yield, to create, not to destroy” (25) but has been reduced to the level of a Shamba-boy (an agricultural labourer). Howlands, the White settler, witnesses the love Ngotho has for the soil. “He just loved to see Ngotho working in the farm; the way the old man touched the soil, almost fondling, and the way he tended the young tea plants as if they were his own . . . Ngotho was too much a part of the farm to be separated from it” (31).

Howlands feels victorious for ‘taming this unoccupied wildness’, whereas Ngotho toils out of a sense of responsibility. “Ngotho felt responsible for whatever happened to this land. He owed it to the dead, the living, and the unborn of his line, to keep guard over this *shamba*” (32). Despite having the urge to support the trade union movement or the freedom movement, Ngotho refuses to be drawn into the protests, since a failure would result in his losing his job and access to ‘the lands of his ancestors’ (55). When the ownership of the land he has tamed is threatened, Howlands starts considering his farm his god, much like the animistic natives (86). Even while being busy with the responsibilities of a District Officer, he continues to keep an eye on his farm.

Njoroge, the central character of the novel and Ngotho’s son, is also aware of his father’s lowly social status because he did not own any land. The young lad firmly believes in the social hierarchy associated with land ownership. “Any man who had land was considered rich. If a man had plenty of money, many motor cars, but no land, he could never be counted as rich. A man who went with tattered clothes but had at least an acre of red earth was better off than the man with money” (19). Kamau adds that a “mere salary without a piece of land to cultivate is nothing” pointing to the richness and happiness in Howlands and Jacobo. He and Njoroge agree that the white men are robbers since they have stolen the lands of the black people despite having received their portion of land “in their own country” (46).

Scott Momaday, the Pulitzer Prize winning Native American novelist, observes that the Native “is deeply involved in the earth, committed to it both in his consciousness and in his instinct. In him the sense of place is paramount. Only in reference to the earth can he persist in his true identity” (14). William C. Sturtevant notes that “Indians all over the continent generally held that the tribal terrain was a trust to be used, and no more saleable than the air” (124).

Native American literature also documents land-loss among the first people of the Americas. It is the central theme of Erdrich’s *Tracks* and the land-loss is the direct outcome of the Dawes Act of 1887. The Act broke up the tribes and encouraged individual initiatives and finally opened the land to white settlers for profit. Though a few aspects of the Dawes Act seem to favour the natives by building cohesive units in the reservation, the ulterior motive threw native-occupied lands for real estate business that favour the whites.

The Native Americans believed that land was not a real estate that could be bartered but was rather a representation of all things that produced and sustained life. Pointing to shared ownership of land and resources, the community never believed in land as the property of an individual or a family; it was owned by the tribes and each family got to use pieces of it as per their needs. The Dawes Act forced the deterioration of the communal life-style of the Native societies and imposed the concept of the nuclear family. The Act gave land to individuals and families, which resulted in land fractionalization and mass sale of the land after the statutory retainer period of twenty-five years. When the Act was repealed in 1934, most of the natives had become landless.

In contrast to the natives’ steadfast attachment to the land, “the whites saw the Indians as but casual and impermanent occupiers of the soil with no notion of ownership, no instrumentalities for recording or transferring title . . . [who] roamed over the land as did beasts of the forest, and constructed no permanent settlements” (McNickle 323). Throughout the novel, the senior narrator Nanapush points out how the Chippewa land has been usurped by the whites and the lumbering companies. He also points out that the mixed bloods are succeeding in expanding their territories through outright purchases and through the connivance of the government officials.

The Dawes Act of 1887 and other government treaties aimed at removing the Chippewa from their native lands. Nanapush speaks out against the treaties: “I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake” (2). He realises how the lure of money forced the weak-willed in the community to throw away their land for pittance: “Our trouble came from the living, from liquor and the dollar bill. We stumbled toward the government bait, never looking down, never noticing how the land was snatched from under us at every step” (4).

By the time they realise what is happening to their traditional land, the community had already lost a huge share of it. “Starvation makes fools of everyone. In the past, some had sold their allotment land for one hundred poundweight of flour” (8). Nanapush warns the younger generation: “Land is the only thing that lasts life to life. Money burns like tinder, flows off like water. And as for government promises, the wind is steadier” (33). When Eli is about to sell his land receiving “money in the agreements, cash for land,” Nanapush warns him that he

would “wake with no place to put [his] foot down.” But he realises that it was too late for him to restore the land to its people. “There were so few of us who even understood the writing on the papers. Some signed their land away with thumbs and crosses” (99). When people line up to sign away their lands, he speaks to them in their native language to advise them against it.

In contrast to *Yawar Fiesta*, it is a Catholic priest who warns the Chippewas of the impending land-loss. When Father Damien brings the map of the community, the families are shocked to realise that all their lands have defaulted on taxes and are at the risk of complete loss. They also find that the mixed bloods have paid up and are already gaining on the lands of the natives. Nanapush realises the looming threat to “the land we would never walk or hunt, from which our children would be barred” (174) and “the uncertainties of facing the world without land to call home” (187).

Erdrich continues her saga of land-loss in her novel *Love Medicine*, which discusses events that happened after *Tracks*. She remarks: “The policy of allotment was a joke. As I was driving toward the land, looking around, I saw as usual how much of the reservation was sold to the Whites and lost forever” (11).

Thousands of miles away, the Arayars presented in Narayan’s *Kocharethi* view land as a gift of nature/god that cannot be owned by individuals – an idea they share with other native communities of the world. Throughout the novel, Narayan documents how the community elders permitted usage—notappropriation—of the land available in the hills for the sustenance of the families, strictly based on their food needs. In her introduction to the novel, Jayasree points this out:

The novel maps the Adivasi’s perceptions of land and its ownership . . . It is an account that traces the possession and dispossession of land, the innocence of a people who did not even have the notion land was ‘property’ and that they could be alienated from it. To the Adivasis, the first inhabitants, there was no question of acquiring individual rights over the land. The land was not separable from their sense of collective identity; they were one with it and celebrated this union in all rites of passage. He (the Adivasi) does not own any land, but the land is his, as much as it belongs to anyone else in the community. Those who are outside this inclusive way of life call it ‘uncivilized’. (xvi-xvii)

When the Arayars become bankrupt, the middlemen and the business people of the valley exploit them and they target the pristine land owned and mended by the tribals. The wily Kunja Mudhalali traps Kunjadichan when the latter fails to repay small loans. He writes off a small loan and gives him another one hundred rupees in exchange for two acres of land. “Kunjadichan did not think that making a thumb imprint was a serious thing. All he felt was tremendous relief – he was rid of the loan. Joyfully he pressed his thumb on the paper” (69).

The forest officials in the novel contrive to get rid of the tribals from their traditional lands. They mark the boundaries of the traditional land held in possession by the Arayars, and ironically, they call the tribals to assist in the survey. The Arayars willingly do this work so that the officials might turn the other way when they clear the forest to get more land for agriculture (86). Later, when they get into a conflict with the forest officials who destroy tribal

property, they are threatened with arrest for usurping the king's land. When they hear this, they retreat, "their hearts heavy with the awareness that the land they stood on was not theirs" (126).

All the four novels under study in this paper present landloss as a major feature of indigenous existence in the twentieth century. While some communities have bounced back to claim their traditional lands and even win them through courts of law, most of the indigenous homelands are lost forever. Literary representation of landloss is a creative method of ensuring that these losses are not lost to the pages of history and serve as stark reminders for settlers and mainstream communities that the lands they live in have been taken through unjust means from the rightful owners – the first peoples of the world.

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