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‘They Made Us Dig Two Graves’¹: An Eco-critical Study of Alison Croggon’s *The River and the Book*

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Abstract

Being one of the prominent issues of the present fast growing technical world, eco-criticism has initiated different types of writing ranging from poetry, travelogues, novels, and non-fictions. As it is a global issue, it has also provided ample space for experiments with different writing techniques within genres. The present paper is an effort to discuss which techniques are being utilized and how and to what level these are effective? The main focus of the paper is on magic realism, inclusion of readerly voice with writer’s literary persona, and ecological issues from post-colonial perspective. Alison Croggon’s *The River and the Book* has been taken as reference book.

Keywords- Eco-Criticism, Spirituality, Materialism, Magic-Realism, Objective Writing

Introduction

Eco-criticism has ignited varied thinkers around the world to speak on the global issues like globalization, industrialization, loss of morality, and global-warming etc. At the same time overwhelming rationality and politicization of language have made writing and speaking on such matters a Herculean task. Writers have to speak in the way the majority of their audiences expect. But at the same time the fire for justice that always ablaze to entangle in such complex issues triggers them to chase the right. Therefore to deal with this intricacy they have to experiment with different writing styles and adopt the most suitable as per their purpose and requirements of their audiences. For this some of them, like Hartosh Singh Bal, get to write journalistic work. But there are always clouds of being targeted by the opposing parties as one can see news of activists and writers arrested, out casted or bombarded for writing against the grain. Some others may choose to write in a quite jolly and ironic ways like Amrit Lal Vegad and shifting the paradigms wherever required for literary or political interests. Such writers comparatively get ensured with a sort of license against hot eco-political issues garbed in artistic love for beauty and writing for pleasure. Because they have

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a scope to embellish their language according to the wave, and at the same time they have a grip on their art loving readers. Apart from these there are writers who choose to write in surrealistic style in order to have a hold on readers' imagination and forcing them to read between lines. The writer under research in this paper writes in such vein. Alison Croggon has written *The River and the Book* in surrealistic style treating ecological and linguistic in a super-realistic way from post-colonial and post-structuralist angle. In the present work she has discussed the matter of importance of written documents in preserving as well as fighting against cultural turmoil. She has depicted the lives of pro-spirituality and pro-materialism people and through their strife she has shown how their clash with each other leads to damage to both. No doubt she has also given a hint to proportional difference in what, how and where they reach.

Alison Croggon is an award-winning Australian poet, critic, novelist, and writer of children's books and dramas. She is a human rights activist and ecologist. She is associated with Amnesty International- a world-wide movement of ordinary people advocating humanity and human rights. Among her famous books are- *The Gift, The Riddle, The Crow, Black Spring, The Singing, and The River and the Book*, etc. In these books she has used surrealism in order to expose psyche of different people and how their psyche is affected. Unlike most of eco-critics and writers she is concerned with the inner experiences rather than collecting just journalistic facts on ecology.

Discussion

The River and the Book spots light on strife between two groups- indigenous poor ones and the outsider rulers. The indigenous people are manly poor farmers and day labors. The river that flows near their habitats is their lifeline for economic gains whereas the Book is the greatest source of their spiritual wellbeing and knowledge about their history and existence. The Book tells that their past has been glorious despite exceptional wars with the tyrant rules. They have survived on their combined resistance against atrocities. Whenever occurs a problem, they consult the Keeper of the Book and the Keeper reads and interprets the statements written in the Book. A unique thing about this practice is that position of the Keeper has been hierarchical through generations of females of a particular family. Now Simbala or Simbi Nuum is the Keeper whose full name- Simbala Da Kulafir Atan Mucarek Abaral Effenda Nuum, includes names of all of her closest predecessors in book keeping. The Book is a sacred thing to be kept and read secretly only by the Keeper. What is interesting about this profession is that the Keeper herself is somehow political in the sense that she doesn't go to a particular page number to find a solution rather she randomly opens a page and reads the statement from her present set of perspective. Still faith of her community is so much in her interpretations that they cannot question her. There may be another reason behind this blind faith that is that she is intelligent enough to know the psyche of her people

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and so she gives answers which suit their expectations. With this mutual understanding their life goes on smoothly.

Contrary to it this are pro-materialists people who give no space to the first group of people. For them they are irrational, ill mannered and objects to be used and controlled for their own interests. This sort of thinking leads them to snatch the agricultural land from poor farmers so that they can use it for producing crops of industrial importance. They turn the flowing river towards industries and cotton fields paying no heed to the subsequent scarcity of water for domestic and agricultural usage in the rural community of Simbala. And how they treat the natives in this regard is a big point of discourse here. Because they snatch the resource i.e. the river, yet in a strategic way they play well with emotions and illiterate minds of the natives. For example, Jane Watson- a researcher and in a way a representative of materialistic people, come to Simbala's community, shows a little bit liberty and concern on its issues and gets to know its weakness. On this issue Simbala opines,

Sometimes it seems to me that those who are interested, the foreigners who do have time, are the worst of all. They think that the things I know are exotic and strange, and my knowledge excites them....They think knowledge is something you can buy, and I often wonder why they come to me instead of consulting the sages of their own lands. (Croggon *The River and the Book* 19-20)

She finds these people simple, 'rustic moralist', 'village-Hampden but devoid of fortune and knowledge', (Gray, Elogy). So she deceives them by thieving their greatest source of strength and knowledge i.e. the Book. As the Book is a proof of their history and a guide to their future, it is very hard for them to survive without it. Without a written document they are 'lost' or 'obscure' (Dai "An Obscure Place") or nothing better than lifeless, thoughtless puppets in hand of the so-called rational materialistic people. Ms. Watson rewrites the natives' history from her own perspective and in this way she does injustice to them. Now they are irrational and literate persons and Watson and her people have been assigned the task of civilizing them.

The poor natives are the worst victims of this dichotomy of interests. They try hard to regain the Book and through that the river's existence as well. But they don't find it. So, Simbala, being the Keeper of the Book takes initiative to get the Book back at any cost. After a long and tough journey she manages to meet Ms. Watson and ask her to return the Book. As expected Ms. Watson denies because she does not want to leave any proof in hands of the natives against the wrong interpretation that she has given in her book on so-called research on Simbala's community. She is hardly moved by the distortion that she has brought in their lives. By hook or by crook Simbala obtains the Book but as it has a counter interpretation done by Ms. Watson, and a lot of discrimination and sufferings have taken place, the Book seems something different. Simbala feels that now the Book does not tells everything about

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her people's lives. For this she makes her mind to write her own book on her real experiences or what Edward Said says about writing,

...history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and rewritten, always with various silences and elisions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements tolerated (Said *Orientalism*).

In this whole process of book-keeping, encounter with the 'Others' (Said *Orientalism*) and re-writing a new history not only Simbala and her people but also Ms. Watson and her people also have to go under physical and mental agony for having own history and for imposing self interpretation on the others respectively. Everyone tries to prove self-truthfulness and thus gets entrapped in between. About this Simbala recalls her grandmother's statement,

You can never be quite certain. And that is a good thing, because only a god can be certain about the truth, and even then only sometimes. It is much harder to be a human being than it is to be god. (66)

Although Simbala is not in favor of taking revenge on Watson, however she is forced by conditions to such an extent that she has to threaten Ms. Watson. Croggon ends the novel with an optimistic view that Simbala hopes for rejuvenation of the Book and settlement of conditions. Nevertheless, there is a common persistent theme that the materialists' group digs two graves in form of sorrows and sufferings for the natives as well as for themselves.

Croggon's novel is special also for experimenting with readerly and writerly voices through different characters especially Simbala, Mely and Ling Ti. For instance Simbala's statement about reading and interpretation, "When I looked in the Book for myself, it always showed me what I loved" (134), is close to Roland Barthes' reader-response theory. Whereas Ling Ti says about writing, "All writing comes from the inside. It burns you with wanting to be written. It's writing that matters"(100). Similarly Mely- Simbala's cat represents objective critics. Throughout the novel she comments on Simbala's attachment with the Book, her desire for writing, her encounter with Ms. Watson, and consequent journey to regain the Book. When Simbala expresses her doubt about her writing skill, Mely says that 'when a writer writes about self then there is no mistake and lie because from his/her perspective that may be truth. A writer does not write for what others expect' (23). Further Mely criticizes Simbala for her subjective and biased writing, "You didn't leave the village because of the River. You left because of the Book" (41). And when Simbala argues, "...what happened to the River is part of what happened to the Book. They are the same thing" Mely reiterates, "it's stupidity. That is how they are the same. Human beings are selfish and greedy and they think that the world has been put there just for them" (41).

Such a combination of readerly and writerly voices, their objective as well as politicized usage and that through from human beings and animals together is distinctive in itself.

Conclusion

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With the above discussion it can be stated that Alison Croggon has done a unique and painstaking experiments. Her work can be a sort of discourse for post-colonialists, cultural theorists, deconstructionists, eco-critics, and symbolists. She has given an ample space for discussing how controversy and ethnicity arises and what it leads to.

Endnote

1. This has been loosely quoted from Simbala's statement in *The River and the Book* where she says that 'revenge digs two graves'.

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