

The Sense of Dislocation and Exile in the Selected Poems of Allen Curnow and Fleur Adcock

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Abstract

One lives in a place that does not belong to one. The sense of exile shapes a colonial perspective. This idea has been in academic sphere, and literary discourse addresses the problem of homelessness, dislocation, migration, and exile emphatically in recent years. In an age of unparalleled migration the trauma and anxiety range from person to person and from region to region. The causes of these problems are political, religious, geographical and cultural. Diaspora literature emerged out of this context as an academic field in the late twentieth century to study the experiences of dispersed individuals who are facing homelessness. The resultant migration may or may not be a matter of choice. Losing a home and a particular locality forever cannot be considered a purely personal choice. The colonial masters, who settled in the colonies even after the colonialism and the people who are victimised under colonial administration, face this problem in different ways. Searching for an identity both cultural and national is also a concern for these dispersed individuals. Though the hybrid culture is adapted later, the sense of exile and identity crisis shape their outlook and there by the literature. This paper attempts to give a sense of dislocation and homelessness as seen in colonised territories. The dispersive experiences felt by the New Zealander poets Allen Curnow and Fleur Adcock and their selected poems are analysed. The homeless experience and migration underwent by these writers are evident in their writings; that are further intensified by their simple, direct and lucid style.

Key words: Exile, migration, refugees, dislocation, race, rootlessness.

Introduction

“Thou shall love thy neighbour as thyself”. The neighbour, whoever he is, if he is alien, native, stranger or acquaintance is our concern since time immemorial. “Atithi Devo Bhava”, an ancient Hindu scripture also echoes a similar meaning; the guest is equivalent to God. In a world people are connected with each other in different ways. The concept of home and family become complete when it is in relation with others such as neighbours and guests. This concept of whole is kept by the individuals for a better life. In a religious perspective neighbours and guests are not strangers. They are treated with divine respect. From this perspective the concept of whole is fragmented and self isolation creep into it. With this, fragmentation becomes a worldwide phenomenon. Different matters are contributed into it.

Migration or more precisely mass migration becomes a regular process in this world. We are living in an age of mass migration where refugees are recurring phenomenon. In the name of religious intolerance and political division rootlessness becomes part of many cultures. In search of shelter and security people move from one place to another and this problem cannot be confined to any region. The world wars, the prevailing political tensions in part of the world led the people to migrate. Syrian refugees, Palestinian refugees, Rohingya refugees and the list are enlarging day by day and thousands are victimized. The perception of being victimized led them to live a despair life. This phenomenon has started from antiquity and continues in the modern era. We know how Adam and Eve were displaced from the Eden garden and consequently led a life of exile.

In this context one cannot give any guarantee for a permanent settlement in a particular region. Environmental crisis and geographical features make anyone rootless. Though political, social and religious causes are deliberate, manmade natural calamities and natural disasters make people homeless. The pain of immigration and dislocation and the constant search for a permanent shelter or home is a matter of concern for scholars and writers in academic sphere. Diaspora literature has been formed in order to share the pains of exile, and it discusses constant search for a homeland, the sense of security in an alien land, cultural and climatic adaptations and so on. The trauma of experience is ranging from person to person and from region to region.

Soren Frank in his *Migration and Literature* quotes Erich Auerbach's idea of Ansatzpunkt in latter's seminal essay "Philology and Weltliteratur". The Ansatzpunkt or 'the point of departure' is like the striking of a chord. This point of departure is of great importance in the present literary studies because, as Soren Frank observes, the amount of accessible material increases in the globalised world market of literature; but at the same time the difficulty of locating patterns of order is another matter. This 'point of departure' helps to link authors or works of migration and capable of acting as a synthesizer. Diaspora literature has been formed to include all migrational experiences irrespective of region and race.

The literature of migration often deals with the theme and experiences of exile across culture and history. These exile experiences can be both a blessing and a curse; it not only inflicts pain, but also arouses new ways of thinking. This literature allows readers in exile to hear their own stories told, and also allows those who do not experience exile to better understand and care about those who are.

The feeling of being an outsider is a realization through which the question of identity is raised. The basic faiths and beliefs that a culture gives us are forced to change in the changed circumstances. The resultant hybridity is the essence of Diaspora Literature. The generation of earlier dispersed individuals is forced to adapt the hybrid culture and even a Creole. Many writers, in a post colonial point of view, face the anxiety of expressing their instincts and impulses through a creolized language. Therefore exile is painful as well as permanent. The sense of loss, in this way, undermines the achievements of any exile and what one loses is not only a home but the realization that one is an outsider, not a native. Intellectually, culturally and socially one becomes an outsider. Edward Said rightly observes this anxiety and he says: "my background is a series of displacements and expatriations which cannot ever be recuperated...I

am always in and out of things and never really of anything for very long”. This condition is inflicted on humans by humans.

The rift created by dislocation is always widening and can never be healed. While social ostracism in the name of culture, politics and religion exists in part of the world, a permanent solution yet to evolve. This paper is an attempt to analyse the problem of exile and homelessness in the selected poems of Allen Curnow and Fleur Adcock. New Zealand had a colonial background where identity crisis and a feeling of not being in proper place are multi dimensional.

The Maori writing and the writing of European descendant

The Maori were the first settlers in New Zealand who were probably arrived from Polynesia between 1200 and 1300 AD. The Great Fleet, considered being the first mass arrival of these Polynesian settler, forms Maori tradition. Their culture was a totally stone-age one until the arrival of Europeans and the introduction of metal. The name Maori originally meant “ordinary people” as opposed to the newly arrived White European settlers.

In the period between the first European landing and the beginning of the 20th century, New Zealand was transformed from an exclusively Maori world. Abel Tasman was the first of the European explorers known to have reached New Zealand in the latter half of the 17th century and the first British explorer was James Cook who arrived in the 18th century. The encounters between Europeans and Maori continued and sailors referred to New Zealand as the “Cannibal Isles”. While the encounter continued, the British government was being pressured to curb lawlessness in the island. As a result, Maori chiefs were forced to sign a treaty at Waitangi. Following the treaty of Waitangi Maori came under pressure to sell their land for settlement. While the North Island totally indulged in war, the South Island settlement prospered.

British people start a new life in New Zealand. The native Maori became homeless and was uprooted and their number decreased gradually. On the other hand, the newly arrived British people took their place and formed a life of their own in an alien land. The resistance from the part of the Maori was few and New Zealand was made self-governing. Dominion status was attained in 1907. While the Maori face homelessness and dislocation, the Europeans face a similar dilemma of not having in their proper place. This is even reflecting in the literature of the island.

Allen Curnow and Fleur Adcock in their writing dealt with the problem of dislocation and migration. Some of their poems reflect a sense of insecurity in New Zealand. The theme of national and social identity, cultural integrity and racial issue are central in New Zealand literature. Along with the European form of literature, Maori writing has come to gain a central place in the literature of the country and the literature of the latter has a strong sense of tradition. Maori writing is concerned mainly with preserving and documenting a culture and a way of life that were being eroded by the European civilization.

While the writers of European descent dominated the literature of New Zealand, indigenous writers challenged the style and treatment of the subjects of the former. Writers of Maori initiated a debate highlighting the greatness of their oral and written literature that was largely

ignored by the European descendants or Pakeha. This discourse has further carried over to the genres of poetry in New Zealand writing. The subject matter of poetry in 20th century was more about cultural concern of the writers especially Allen Curnow and Fleur Adcock.

Allen Curnow and his feeling of homelessness

Thomas Allen Munro Curnow is one of prominent writers of New Zealand. He published his first collection of poems *Valley of decision* in 1933. His early verses and social satires were published under the nom de guerre Julian and Whim Wham respectively. Though he was born as the son of an Anglican clergy man and studied theology, his early poems were inspired by a personal religious crisis. From this early personal poems and political satires, Curnow then began to centre more on New Zealand and its history and his notable publications include *Enemies: Poems* (1937), *Not in Narrow Seas* (1939), *Island and Time* (1941) and *Sailing and Drowning* (1943). In his writings he identified a number of distinctive national themes as New Zealand progressed beyond a strictly colonial identity.

In the beginning of the 20th century New Zealand was trying to form a distinctive national culture and it is a common believe that artists can help to define New Zealand. The 1930s saw the emergence of a new breed of writers, whose works were a reaction against established ideas and conventions and they were also influenced by recent trends in literature, notably modernism, and by social and political events such as dislocation and mass migration. Along with a growing sense of nationalism, the sense of being an outsider was a great concern for these writers who still looked to England as “Home”. Some among them were Allen Curnow, Denis Glover and Fleur Adcock.

The spirit of exile is the essence of Allen Curnow’s many poems. Three of his poems are taken here to analyse the theme of exile and they are “House and Land”, “In Memorium, R.L.M.G” and “To Fanny Rose May”. In “House and Land” Curnow treats the characters, especially the older generations, sympathetically. Curnow finds their problem still relevant. It depicts the world of a Pakeha household in New Zealand visited by a historian, apparently searching the origins of colony. People live in a place that does not belong to them. Never is the pathetic aspect of this colonial theme so clear as it is in the figure of old Miss Wilson, the owner of the household in question. The poem begins with the historian in the property’s cowshed, asking the cowman “Wasn’t this the site, asked the historian, / of the original homestead?” From the cowman’s reaction, we come to the conclusion that this is the original homestead. The cowshed is in fact the homestead in which Miss Wilson was born and raised. This implies that Miss Wilson’s origins were mean, uncomfortable, and poor. The cowman does not answer, but said “I just live here”. The prefix “Miss” further hints at her unmarried status, which is also an idea about her economic status. From the cowman it is clear that her mother preceded her father in death, and the cowman has only worked for her since the old man has been dead.

The present state of the homestead is explained in the next stanza. The “moping” of the dog sets the mood and atmosphere, followed by “under the bluegums, and the colour blue is associated with depression. The dog is symbolic in some way of the old woman who is psychologically shackled to this place, a stagnant privy being a fair comparison with her life. The images like the

chained dog, the privy, the fowl house all give us the impression of depression and of being trapped.

The third stanza shows us Miss Wilson, sitting below pictures of her kinsman in England, “the baronet uncle, mother’s side”. The England’s class based society is revealed here. She would not be the first colonial to claim an upper class origin in England. The picture of “The Hall” represents a typical ancestral residence of the English aristocracy. Her concept of home lies in England, unlike this place in which she lives. Though she has been living here she does not identify New Zealand as her home country. The baronet, the hall, the silver teapot and all these images create an impression of wealth, grandeur and aristocracy but the tragedy is that the house might fall at any time. She is living in an artificial world and Curnow satirically describes them.

“People in the colonies, she said, /Can’t quite understand.../It was all my father’s land”. But the fact is that the great expanse of land was here for millennia before her father’s arrival. It was settled land and his ownership remains after his departure. So what she tries to convey is that as she is a colonial she tries to vindicate her own denigration. From the evidence, the historian concludes that the “spirit of exile...is strong in the people still”

The final stanza describes the cowman and the rabbitier. The rabbitier is supplying the household with meat and this is interesting that Miss Wilson still pretends her aristocracy. The symbolism of the confined dog is reinforced as it now looks “lost and lame” just like the old woman. The “great gloom” at the end of the poem is an intensification of the depressed atmosphere of a land of exiles.

In “In Memorium R.L.M.G” Allen Curnow brings out a similar idea of homelessness. The poem is taken from “Tomb of an Ancestor” and it is honouring the poet’s eternal grandmother. This poem is treated with a positive mood. While “house and Land” reflects a sense of lost, this poem is treated in a gentler way. During the course of time the poet had come very close to this country. The picture of RLMG is entirely sympathetic, without the touch of satire found in Miss Wilson.

The picture of her homesickness for the mother country is effectively carried out. The opening of the poem states her nostalgic feeling for the mother country: “...burst into tears and cried / Let me go home”. The image of home is crucial to the oldest generation and what they desire for is native identity. But the grandmother is forced to stay in the changed circumstances and each of the ships that are passing is painful for her, further she knows that she cannot claim anything in her home country.

Where she could finally reach is the yellow grave: “she died by the same sea. /...she led us... / to the yellow grave”. The poet knows that this is the ultimate fate of all European descendants who once settled in the island and unable to return. All her home country feeling ended with her death, so as the present generation and in the latter such a nostalgic feeling is futile. Unlike the oldest generation, the poet and his generation attempt to live in the island: “...our feet/ were seen to have stopped” and he continues to say that even the street is like an ink-blue river; the colour blue here too associated with depression and desolation and the feeling of depression reflects “in the heat to the bay, the basking ships, this isle of her oblivion, our broad day”. This sense of dislocation is typical of his poems.

The grandmother's lost desire frequently haunts the poet. Though the degree of nostalgia towards the lost home, from older generation to the present generation is diminishing, it is indispensable. The spirit of exile is permanent and therefore it is kept in every European descendant. He concludes the poem by reiterating the influence of his deceased grandmother's home feeling: "...she stretched like time behind us, or / Graven in cloud, our farthest ancestor".

The companion piece of "In Memorium R.L.M.G" is "To Fanny Rose May" and it is addressed to his great aunt. While the older generation struggles to cope up with the serious problem of homesickness, the present generation like Curnow accepts the reality that New Zealand is their homeland. The old generation finds sweetness in their lost fabulous old England. The voyage which took the English sisters to this new land deserves attention and praising. After settling in the island, the memories of their mother country continue to haunt them, a painful reality only old generation suffers. Therefore they call the alien land "barbaric".

A note of lamentation is apparent in the companion poems. It is evident in the poems: "Let me go home", "watching...ships after ships", "fabulous old England". But a growing acceptance of the homeland is taking place in the present generation. Curnow calls New Zealand "My mountainous islands". He is indeed demonstrating the effort of habituating the climate as well as the culture. This anxiety has been one of his chief themes: "A million years old memory, but there's / Neither memory nor world here, but that hill...I grow (here) and this praise flows, this blood, this name".

Fleur Adcock and her feeling of exile

The state of exile life is further taken by many European descendants and Fleur Adcock is a prominent figure among them. Though she was born in New Zealand, she spent much of her childhood in England. She received her education from England and she has been writing full-time since 1989. A collected edition of her poetry, "Poems: 1960-2000" was published in 2000. In 2008 she was named Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for service to literature.

In her writings, she questions identity. The sense of being a New Zealander and the English root is a crisis she faces in her poetry. She loves being in England but resists when her family moves back to New Zealand. Therefore a search of identity and genealogy is a matter of concern for her. The subject matter of her poetry is contemporary events in order to explore the dilemma of an exile artist. She rejects modernist tendency of TS Eliot and Ezra Pound.

Her experience of a white immigrant is a matter when she comes to know her New Zealander identity. The same poet, when she returns England, finds the English identity an escape from New Zealand. Though she was not oppressed and discriminated on the basis of race and ethnic, she chose England as a self-imposed exile in the country of her ancestors.

The question of identity and belonging reflect in many of her poems and two of her poems are analysing here to discuss ancestry, geography, displacement and the natural world of England and New Zealand.

"Immigrant" as the title suggests is about her own experience when she arrived in London from New Zealand. She feels like a stranger in her dream country. Published in 1979 in her "The Inner Harbour", the feeling of a person in a new culture is highlighting here. She tries to become

English by all means but inside, the New Zealander identity is troubling her. On the one hand she deserves to be a genuine Londoner and on the other hand she struggles to lose her New Zealand accent.

Arriving in London she” pause on the low bridge to watch the pelicans”. Like the speaker pelicans are non-native birds. Though they resemble typical English swan like birds when they float, it is awkward when it comes to putting their large beaks into water. The image of pelican makes her aware of her immigrant identity. When this identity comes out within her, she tries to cling to her outward English identity: “I clench cold fists in my Marks and Spencer’s Jacket”. This ambivalent identity is awkward for the poet, a dandy game.

The poet then goes on to confirm her English identity by secretly testing her accent: “Secretly test my accent once again: /St Jame’s park; St Jame’s park; St Jame’s park. She knows that she has not quite mastered the English accent yet. Many immigrants from New Zealand are aware of their accent. Some believe their accent is wrong and it is not up to the standard of British accent. This is why she repeats the English word thrice to ensure the quality of accent. All these create a sense of dislocation in the poet.

Fleur Adcock’s elegy on the death of her contemporary New Zealand writer James K Baxter shares a similar ambivalent nature who was a poet and a playwright. He is known as an activist for the preservation of Maori culture. While writing this poem she faces a personal dilemma. Though she is attracted by the English literary style, she praises the contribution of Baxter, who stands for Maori tradition. Her style changes here as if she is speaking to someone in an informal way. The poem is taken from the collection “The Scenic Beauty” (1974).

The poem, she says is a farewell letter, written in Shakespearean form. As she is not a trendsetter she uses iambic rhyming for writing this letter poem. “What better models have we...?” Dylan and Eliot were not his model, but North American Lowell was his favour. Fleur was influenced by English tradition and not by Baxter. She knows that she has New Zealand blood, “our ocean is called Pacific, not Atlantic”. Therefore when thinking about Baxter she writes this farewell poem. She doesn’t know whether to approve a Maori poet or to go with English tradition. But his death is a shock to her as he is Fleur’s husband’s friend. She places him with New Zealand and “destruction can’t delete an image”. Fleur still recalls him though she is a hemisphere away from him. She knows him for the last 20 years.

The poet minutely recalls all her memories with Baxter and his “generous comments on my verse”. She doesn’t call it a dirge, but a letter though she knows “those tolerant eyes will register no more”. Even in this condition the poet is not sure and finally she says: “but praise all that you gave to the tradition?” The uncertainty and contradictory attitude are apparent in the poem. Though she wants to strengthen her English tradition, she cannot completely root out her native identity.

Conclusion

The exile experiences of both Allen Curnow and Fleur Adcock are less harmful though painful at personal level. In an age of mass migration people experience the trauma of dislocation in many ways. For some, a permanent shelter is their destination, and for other identity crisis is their

concern. But the Diaspora literature gives us further painful and tragic realities of migration. It varies from person to person and region to region.

Both Curnow and Fleur share the problem of cultural and national identity crises. Their condition of being in-between or hybridized identities is more personal. Rootlessness and cultural displacement therefore become their frequent subject matter. Curnow deals with the problem of defining his New Zealand identity and he accepts the position where he stands and Fleur on the other hand does not want to have her national identity and tries to embrace her ancestor's traditions that of an English.

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