



Ecological Imperialism: History, Legacy and Manifestation in *That Deadman Dance* and *Carpentria*

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Ecological imperialism is the systematic exploitation of the natural resources and ecology of a nation or a state or a geographical area by another nation for various reasons, often veiled by an explanation to justify the pillage. Although ecological imperialism is as old as imperialism itself, the history of the concept as we know it today, can be traced back to the colonial expansion of Europe in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Ecological imperialism presents itself in two ways: the looting of the resources of a nation, country etc. by an imperialist force and the complete transformation of the ecology of the nation states. Britain is a classical example of forces guilty of ecological exploitation of colonies. Cecil Rhodes, better explains the true nature of British imperialism and the chief motivation behind it: “We must find new lands from which we can easily obtain raw materials and at the same time exploit the cheap slave labour that is available from the natives of the colonies. The colonies would also provide a dumping ground for the surplus goods produced in our factories”

The term Ecological Imperialism was coined by Dr. Alfred Crosby in his 1986 book *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe, 900 to 1900*. According to Crosby, colonisation was not just a form of cultural and political tyranny, it was also a form of environmental terrorism. He went on to contest that the ecological dimension in fact was paramount, as is evident from the fact that colonisers brought with them species of flora and fauna, diseases etc. hitherto unknown to the new found lands which always resulted in the devastation of people and biodiversity alike. These alien species and diseases slowly exterminated the local ecology and resulted in the loss of various exotic species, exclusive to the attacked geographical area. The introduction of new styles of agriculture also had catastrophic environmental impacts. There has been a fair amount of works written on the subject by the likes of Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster and Amitav Ghosh to name a few.

The pillage of natural wealth from the periphery resulted in great fortunes being made for the empire. Monopolies over salt, opium, beetle in India and opium in China resulted in unfathomable stores of wealth. The colonisers created monocultures in the colonies just for the export of cash crops. These monocultures constituted “a sieve for the draining of natural wealth . . .” And, to worsen the matter, such monocultures were not the only modes of Ecological Imperialism. These were accompanied by the British ‘high farming’ or industrialised agriculture which sucked out the nutrients of the soil in England and then sought to replenish it by robbing other countries of their soil. Foster and Clark (2004) in their paper “Ecological Imperialism and the Global Metabolic Rift”, talk about how the colonizers robbed the colonies of their natural wealth via military violence and/or otherwise. Giving the example of the exploitation of Peru's nitrate fields by the British to make up for the loss of soil nutrients in England, they expose how and why the Nitrate War was started by the British with the help of Chile against Bolivia and Peru, resulting in the collapse of economies of Peru, Bolivia and Chile. By the end of the 19th century, “most of the Earth had been parcelled out to one metropolitan power or another.” (Foster,1994, p.87). Resources, nutrients were being pumped out from the margins and injected into another ecosystem at the centre. John Bellamy Foster in his book *The Ecological Revolution: Making Peace with the Planet* argues that the metabolism between nature and society needs to be re organised in a way keeping climate change and other problems in focus.

Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance* (2010) has been a monumental indigenous novel in the oeuvre of Australian literature. At the heart of the novel is the Noongar concept of "the dead man dance," a ceremonial ritual that symbolizes the cyclical rhythms of life and death, creation and destruction. Through this motif, Scott foregrounds the interconnectedness of indigenous cultures with the natural world, highlighting the reverence and respect that Noongar people have for the land and its ecological balance. From the onset, the novel talks about the first contact between the European settlers and the indigenous people (Noongars) of the Australian continent. Whereas the ethics of the natives are represented by a custodian like, symbiotic relationship to the land, creatures and the ocean, the British ethics are governed by Christianity, which gives man dominion over nature, and also by capitalism, a mad race for development and material progress. Hence, for the colonisers, the land, water, animals, resources and even the people are commodities. In the beginning itself the novel exposes the difference in attitudes of the Noongar and colonisers towards nature. From the clearing of forests and the introduction of European farming practices to the depletion of wildlife and the pollution of waterways, the novel vividly depicts the ecological upheaval wrought by European settlement. As Noongar lands are seized and traditional hunting grounds destroyed, the indigenous peoples of Western Australia are forced to confront the existential threat posed by ecological imperialism. Scott interrogates the Eurocentric worldview that underpins ecological imperialism, highlighting its destructive consequences for both human communities and the natural world.

As European whaling ships arrive on the shores of Western Australia in search of valuable whale oil and blubber, they bring with them a wave of ecological devastation that threatens the delicate balance of marine ecosystems

and the traditional way of life of the Noongar people. The whaling industry serves as a tool of cultural erasure, as European settlers seek to impose their own values and customs upon indigenous peoples and undermine their traditional way of life. Through Bobby's encounters with the spirit of the whale, Scott offers profound insights into the indigenous understanding of ecology and the interconnectedness of all living beings, challenging the reader to reconsider their relationship with the natural world. Whereas Bobby considers whales as “me the brothers” (261), the colonisers look at them as an opportunity for making profits. A few more whales and captain brother Jonathan would have all the oil he could carry. . . . Chaine could have all the bone; there was still a market for the fine structures from their mouths, stays and bustles for the fashionable ladies.” (271)

The whole novel is dictated by this contrast in attitudes towards nature. Geordie Chaine, “the most enterprising man” establishes a commercial settlement on the southern coast of Western Australia. He makes profits from everyone he knows and banks on the American whalers who flood the docs in winters to catch whales for their oil, to support the industrialization of America. It is Jordi who is responsible for the dramatic increase in the hunting of whales, until there aren't any to be hunted. “But what about the whales? Maybe we fished them out.” (338) The whales are fished out by the hunting sprees. The Noongar having a spiritual connection with the whales, as spirits of their ancestors and brothers to them, have to witness this slaughter. They, in return are forced to steal food from the settlers. Whales for the natives represent their kin, ancestors. The disappearance of whales marks a reversal in the relations between the indigenous people and the settlers. E.C. Rolls while talking about the first settlers remarks, “the first settlers were enthusiastic prisoners. Everything that seemed at all likely to be troublesome was poisoned- the wombat, the rat kangaroo, the wedge tailed eagle, any species of hawk, the Raven, the dingo. . . the native cat and the tiger cat for poultry reading, and the goanna for egg eating. The aboriginals were also nearly gone.” (pg.18)

Alexis wright's *Carpentria* explores how the ecological landscape of the fictional town of Desperance, located in the Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Australia, and is deeply intertwined with the social, cultural, and political struggles of its indigenous inhabitants, particularly the Pricklebush people. The arrival of European settlers and the subsequent exploitation of natural resources such as land, water, and minerals lead to environmental degradation and disruption of traditional ways of life. Through vivid storytelling and magical realism, Wright portrays the impact of ecological imperialism on the land and its indigenous custodians. The novel highlights issues such as land dispossession, pollution, and the destruction of sacred sites, all of which are consequences of imperialistic exploitation and disregard for the interconnectedness of ecosystems and indigenous cultures. The concept of ecological imperialism permeates the narrative, woven intricately into the fabric of the story as it explores the complex interplay between the land, its indigenous custodians, and the forces of colonization and exploitation. The town of Desperance serves as a microcosm of the broader struggles faced by indigenous communities across Australia in the wake of European colonization. From the outset, Wright immerses the reader

in a landscape teeming with life and vitality, where the land itself is a character, pulsating with ancient wisdom and spiritual significance. The pristine wilderness of the Gulf becomes a battleground, where the forces of greed and exploitation clash with the indigenous inhabitants who have called this land home for millennia.

Through the character of Joseph Midnight, a charismatic leader and spiritual guardian of the Pricklebush people, Wright exposes the devastating impact of mining and industrial pollution on the fragile ecosystem of the Gulf. As toxic chemicals leach into the waterways and pristine wilderness is razed to make way for industrial infrastructure, the very lifeblood of the land is poisoned, and the delicate balance of nature is thrown into disarray. While exploiting the resources, the settlers also ramped up legislation designed to control the natives. This was an attempt to systematically remove the natives from their land and to subdue their culture, especially their language. Simon Ryan (1994) notes, “The animals were seen as bizarre, the trees peculiar and even monstrous, the vegetation continually green; indeed, the country in its entirety seemed to be the product of whimsy and an affront to good taste” (p.120). Hence, the urge to change everything in accordance with the Eurocentric tradition.

In addition to their critique of ecological imperialism, *Carpentria* and *That Deadman Dance* also explore the legacy of colonial violence and dispossession that continues to reverberate through indigenous communities to this day. Through the characters of Elias Smith, haunted by the ghosts of his ancestors and the traumas of the past, and Bobby, who represents the native youth, Wright and Scott confront the reader with the painful legacy of colonization and the ongoing struggle for justice and reconciliation. According to E.C Rolls (1984), legacies of Ecological Imperialism range from damage by alien land use practices to the decimation of indigenous species, including humans. In the contemporary world, Ecological Imperialism still presents itself as boldly as ever. Although direct colonisation is more or less behind us, some nations still exercise imperialist attitudes, as is evident from the USA’s Invasion of Iraq, the second largest producer of oil in the world. Indirect control over other countries is best exemplified by huge companies like Monsanto, Cargill, Microsoft etc. These companies are influential in altering ecosystems around the world. Their footprint is as large as some nations. In fact, they represent nations and their interests. “Imperialist forces impose socio-ecological regimes of production on the world, deepening the antagonistic division between town and country, as well as between the North and South. It is beneficial for profit seeking minorities that the production, consumption and the distribution of food is seen as a business and not as some aspect that is of the highest importance to a society. Ecological imperialism has meant a looting of resources, destruction of ecosystems and even dumping of wastes in the periphery. This has not changed even after centuries as is evident from the nitrate – guano wars, the oil wars, the wars for gold etc. all in the 21st century itself. “Modern capitalism is a system of ecological imperialism” (Foster,1994).

Conclusion

Imperialism's encounter with nature is also an encounter between different conceptions of nature. Even though the West claimed that their project was about objective and rational ways to manage and understand nature, it was primarily influenced by a thirst for material progress. One of the most important "legacy" of colonialism might be the idea of an "environment" that needs institutions to govern it. There is a relationship between nature and the colonies and everyday life in Europe and the West. It is influenced by many economic and material dimensions. The exploitation of resources in the colonies helped enrich the West and increased the demand for products of the empire. Such relationships in literature can be identified through Said's technique of "contrapuntal reading". It considers intermingled perspectives to establish connections and reveal how the colonizers depended on the colony for their growth. According to Said, Contrapuntal reading "is reading with the awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated, and of the histories against which the dominating discourse acts." A study of Colonialism is important for understanding the relationship between society and environment today to get a more accurate account of the origins of environmentalism which emerged in the colonies and not in the imperial centre and how this historical loot shapes contemporary environmental challenges.

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