



The Aborigines and The Adivasis: Sharing a Common Voice; Analyzing Judith Wright's *Bora Ring* and Shanmugam Chettiar's *We are the Adivasis*

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Abstract— *In this paper, we analyze Judith Wright's poem, "Bora Ring", and Shanmugam Chettiar's poem, "We are the Adivasis", under the light of postcolonial theory. By using Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "mimicry," we showcase the plight of indigenous communities like the Aborigines of Australia and the Adivasis of India, communities that fail to identify with the neo-colonial 'mimic-identity' and culture have been thereby relegated as the 'other'. The plight of both communities shows stark similarities, as is evident in the analysis of the poems.*

Keywords— *Aborigines, Adivasi, Mimicry, Mimic-colonization, Mimic-identity, Postcolonialism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The debate between the modern and the traditional has been ongoing ever since man started moving into the realm of the industrial age. Being modern is considered to be pro-development. Modernity is supposed to simplify the complex and make people's lives easy and comfortable. It seeps into everyday practices, beliefs and technology. Traditional as a word is not seen in a very positive sense; if you are traditional or follow the traditional way, you are sometimes not considered pro-development. However, some communities and cultures still try to preserve their traditional sense of being but more often; it's to showcase that they have some traditional history and have a sense of belonging to the land from which they come.

The modern world now lives in metropolises, in shimmering cities away from the dust of villages. A country's index of development is gauged from the percentage of its rural and urban population. "Following industrial development, the process of urban-ization is accelerating at a much faster rate. Urbanization brings about social and cultural changes in community life, which also correspond to modernization. (Mondal). With 70% of

the population living in rural areas, India is a third-world country, and the US, with its 80% urban population, is considered a developed one.

When countries start developing, they exploit the land and other resources to fuel the engine of development. The development wheel side-lines the interests of the traditional landholding patterns, including those who live on these lands for survival, the 'uncivilized and orthodox' communities. e.g., the Adivasi in India and Aborigines in Australia.

Development is a massive part of a growing nation, but it is pertinent that the interests of all stakeholders must align with the idea of the said development. The tribal and poor villagers should have shared interests if they are to be included in the mainstream notion of progress. Their livelihoods cannot be sacrificed for others. Our governments have, however, profusely refused to help and provide refuge to these resilient communities, buckling under the pressures of neo-capitalism that conveniently relegates the native-traditional as 'uncivilized' and 'barbaric'.

The Aborigines of Australia and Adivasis of India have been exploited since the colonial machinery set their camps on the shores of the two countries. The British colonial enterprise has directly or indirectly been instrumental in their displacement.

In the case of Australia, it was the English who, in search of riches, set up settlements, but as the land was not found conducive, the continent was used as a penal colony where convicts were sent as a form of punishment. The indigenous Aboriginal population of Australia was displaced to make space for the penal colonies. Since colonization, Aboriginal people have been internally displaced from their country.

The Adivasis of India are tribal groups endemic to mainland South Asia. They were displaced to clear spaces for the colonial industrial expansion. They have suffered what the researcher terms *mimic – colonization* because it was the native Indian population that worked as an agent for the British imperial system to clear out lands and drive the Adivasis out of their traditional spaces. Critics have long questioned the bracketing of people under labels like 'tribal' and 'Adivasi', Sussana B.C. Devalle examines the origins of terms like "adivasi" and "tribal" and calls them a "construct" and "a colonial category and that it [the category] formed part of the colonial legitimizing ideology. (71)"

The literature of both the countries has questioned the conscience of the nation-states and championed the cause of Adivasis and Aborigines. The poems of Judith Wright from Australia and Shanmugam Chettiar from India provide a glimpse into the problems faced by the indigenous populations.

In this paper, we analyze *Bora Ring* of Wright and *We are the Adivasis* of Chettiar to show how these indigenous groups separated by culture, language, and continents share a common voice.

II. "MIMICRY" and MIMIC-COLONIZATION

Today, when both India and Australia are sovereign countries with their constitution, rights for people and ideals of democracy, the Aborigines and the Adivasis still face a multitude of problems and issues. The Adivasis of India and the Aborigines of Australia bear the brunt of being considered the 'other', the 'traditional' and are relegated as outcasts. The colonial experience has significantly impacted the minds of the people who now find themselves attached to the perceived refined culture of the English. They imitate the lifestyle of their colonizers in a practice that Homi K. Bhabha refers to as "mimicry". Bhabha's conception of "mimicry" is, however, not only

mere "slavish imitation" where "the colonized [is] adopting and adapting to the colonizer's culture"; it is "exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners, and ideas. This exaggeration means that mimicry is repetition with a difference, and so it is not evidence of the colonized's servitude. (Huddart 39)". The creation of this *mimic-identity* was a result of the colonialists' aspirations that find an echo in words of Macaulay's famous *Minutes* of 1835, in which he wanted to create a pool of Indians who would be able to serve British interests and be loyal to them. This class would be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. (27)." The engendering of a mimic-self has, however, created enormous problems. It has been a cause of numerous atrocities for those who don't identify with the culture of "mimicry" that has become mainstream. Neo-colonial nation-states have tried to 'reform' these non-mimic indigenous groups where "We find in multi-ethnic states a variety of assimilative, integrative and indigenist policies, and instances of ethnocide and even genocide, all justified in the name of 'progress'" (Devalle 73). These communities suffer from what the researcher terms *mimic-colonization* within their own countries; it can be defined as second-hand colonization brought about by those who have developed mimic identities. Although "mimicry" is a form of resistance, according to Bhabha, and the colonized use it as a medium to ridicule the colonizers' narrative, in doing so, they imbibe certain traits and features of the alleged superior culture of the colonizer, developing a *mimic-identity*. When the first order colonized mimic-identity bearers come across a native-traditional within their lands, they see them as 'inferior' and 'uncivilized', and they try to push the practice of "mimicry" as their form of a civilizing mission. The traditional native resists this kind of forced mimicry and is therefore seen as a threat. The *mimic-identity* ultimately becomes a source for this second-hand colonization of the traditional-native, defined as *mimic-colonization*.

III. JUDITH WRIGHT & SHANMUGAM CHETTIAR

Judith Arundell Wright was an Australian poet, environmentalist and campaigner for Aboriginal land rights. Her poems deal with the relationship between settlers and Indigenous Australians and their correlations with the ecology of the land.

Wright responded to her knowledge of her ancestors being responsible for the destruction of the indigenous population, their resources and disturbances in the overall ecological balances that the settlers had created. She felt responsible in part for the atrocities that had been

committed. "[She] acknowledged that her ancestors had not entered simply as pioneers settling on uninhabited wilderness but as conquerors invading a lived-in territory. (Walia 92)" Her poems showcase empathy toward the original inhabitants, repentance and guilt for the wrongs her ancestors inflicted on the population, and a sense of hope that one day there might come about a reconciliation between the two communities. In one of her poems, she writes:

Our people who gnawed at the fringe

 Left you a margin of action, a rural security,
 and left to me
 what serves as a base for poetry,
 a doubtful song that has a dying fall. ("For the Pastoral Family," 17-22)

Her poems can be read as one of the fertile grounds from which eco-criticism in Australia germinated. They can also be read in a postcolonial sense because the subjects of her poems are not only questions of ecology but also of identity and subjugation.

In the poem, *Bora Ring*, first published in 1946 in the collection with the same title, Judith Wright shows Australia's land's condition after its native inhabitant aboriginal population has been wiped out.

The plight of the loss of land of the natives has also been taken up in poems of regional literature of India. Shanmugam Chettiar, a resident of Tamil Nadu, is a prolific writer. He has taken up a multitude of issues in his poems. Almost all his poems are short, sharp and telegraphic. In his poem *We are the Adivasis*; he explores the issue of Adivasi rights. The poem is narrated from the point of view of an Adivasi who laments the loss of land, identity and his culture; the questions of who are the original inhabitants of the land and who are the invaders are central to the understanding of the poem.

IV. ANALYSIS

The plight of the loss of land of the natives has been taken up in literature both in India and Australia. Many poems voice the horrors, concerns, and future outlooks of these marginalized communities, which have borne the brunt of development and modernism. An analysis of two particular poems brings forth a search for identity amongst the natives who feel lost in their own land amidst the mad race of development. The question of who were the colonized and who were the colonizers become indefinite as the lines between the 'traditional-other' and the 'modern-self' become vague and blurry.

In the poem *Bora Ring*, Judith Wright shows the condition of the land of Australia after its native inhabitant aboriginal population has been wiped out:

The song is gone; the dance
 is secret with the dancers in the earth,
 the ritual useless, and the tribal story
 lost in an alien tale. ("Bora Ring," 1-4)

The lines 'the song is gone' and 'the hunter is gone' symbolize a sense of loss. There is a lamentation over the loss of cultural identity. A parallel rhythm of ideas runs in both poems pursuing the impact of the loss of tribal culture from the perspective of nature. Wright contrasts the artificial "spear" and "painted bodies" in *Bora Ring* with the "grass" and "apple-gums" that are found in nature. The "song" and "dance" of line one, as works of art that aim to represent nature, also take on a natural quality in contrast to the human labels of "hunter" and "nomad feet." In Wright's work, the Aborigines depicted by nature lament the extinction of their way of life and religion. Being "lost in an alien narrative" alludes to how Western society struggles to comprehend the Aboriginal culture and distorts it into a source of fear and evil. The caricature of primitive people with "painted bodies" and "nomadic feet" highlights the preconceptions of Western civilization. Other than its own Christian notion of civilization, it is unable to comprehend another culture.

The poem *We are the Adivasis* discusses a similar situation where the Adivasis lament their land being taken over by the 'aryans'. Shanmugam Chettiar also depicts how "Hindu Aryans" and "Christian intruders", or the British who considered the Adivasis uncivilized, came intending to civilize them. It diluted their values and cultures. Chettiar writes,

We are the adivasis
 Who by Hindu Aryans
 Were polluted
 And by Christian intruders
 Were diluted in our values and principle ("We are the Adivasis," 35 - 40)

Chettiar clearly outlines the colonization of the original inhabitants at the hands of the "Hindu Aryans" and "Christian intruders". The Aryans came much before the imperial machinery started working in India; they displaced the land's original inhabitants. Thereafter, the British East India Company colonized the land, and the Adivasis, already bearing the brunt of being considered the 'other', came under second-order colonization.

Wright in *Bora Ring* also tries to showcase the condition of the land when the original dwellers are wiped out. What remains are remanent of their culture and life, symbolic of loss and mourning,

The hunter is gone; the spear
is splintered underground; the painted bodies
a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot.
The nomad feet are still. ("Bora Ring," 9 - 12)

The use of the words "gone", "splintered", "sleeping", "forgot", and "still", etc., remind us time and again that there used to be a self-sustaining civilization. This civilization was progressive, albeit not in the eyes of the invaders, but they had their own values and belief system that was conveniently destroyed.

In contrast to Western civilization, Wright values nature and the perspectives of the Aboriginal people. She questions the Christian invaders because she perceives a meaningful religious harmony in the spirit of the Aboriginal people. Wright pays homage to a long-gone culture by revealing the sin of Western civilization while also making the reader reevaluate their ideas about human nature.

Chettiar, on the other hand, discusses the plight of the Adivasis. They were devoid of their individual and cultural identity but are determined now to overthrow the 'Aryan chauvinism' and 'undo the wrongs' that these intruders have done to them. They want their 'thrones' which were 'usurped by the invaders'. He writes,

We are the adivasis,
Who want back our throne
Usurped by the invaders,
And who want to undo wrongs
And avenge the Aryan chauvinism. ("We are the Adivasis," 41 – 45)

The poem also mocks the supposed new ideals and civility that the invaders and colonizers brought along. According to the poet, there was already a sense of "democracy and solidarity", there was no caste system, and there was no concept of "superiority" and "purity" in the Adivasi social system.

We are the adivasis,
Where there lived
Democracy and solidarity
With no superiority,
With no Brahmin nobility and purity. ("We are the Adivasis," 26 – 30)

V. CONCLUSION

In both poems, the poets succinctly showcase the plight of the indigenous inhabitants who are being exploited at the hands of the colonizers who, to civilize the colonized, have wiped out their cultural and individual identity. The colonized, however, want to restore their cultural beliefs and values from the mimic culture established by the colonizers. There is also a fine line between who was the first colonizer and who was the colonized on a temporal scale. The poem *We are the Adivasis* treats the Aryans as the original colonizer. In contrast, the poem *Bora Ring* depicts the arrival of the Europeans on the Australian shorelines as the start of colonialism in their respective lands. Thus, the concept of a postcolonial era is also called into question as it is evident that colonialism is still an ongoing process. It changes forms, nature, and names into etymological categories such as neo-colonialism. Bhabha's concept of "mimicry" also helps understand how the colonized resist the colonizer's attempts to assimilate them by mocking the alleged superior culture. Still, when the colonized come across a non-mimic indigenous population, they try to colonize that particular group through what the researcher has termed *mimic-colonization*. The similarities in both these poems portray lament over the loss of identity of the inhabitants and their determination to bring back their lost culture by reflecting on the past in both India and Australia.

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