

THE INVINCIBILITY OF NATURE IN THE FACE OF SUBJUGATION: A STUDY OF MARK O'CONNOR'S 'THE OLIVE TREE' AS A CRITIQUE OF HUMAN HUBRIS

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Abstract

Mark O'Connor is one of the best-known contemporary poets from Australia. In this Paper an attempt has been made to read 'The Olive Tree' as a poem that simultaneously celebrates Olive trees invincibility in the face of subjugation and mocks human hubris that foolishly tries to master nature. Using the Olive tree as a symbol, O Connor tries to bring out the phoenix like quality of nature that despite all kinds of calamities and failed efforts to destroy it has the unfailing ability to revive. The eternal cycle of nature's destruction and subjugation followed by its revival continues seamlessly. The human hubris is mocked for its reckless, rash and injudicious use of nature.

Key Words: *Mark O'Connor Olive tree, Nature, hubris, invincible, resilience.*

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The COVID 2019 (Corona virus) was a brutal jolt on the face of human's pride in scientific and medical advancements and achievements. It took only a microscopic virus to make humans realise that they are too puny in the face of the wrath of nature and its mysteries. Human hubris has been brutally mocked at this unprecedented moment of history. In this paper, an attempt has been made to read Mark O' Connor's 'The Olive Tree' as a poem that simultaneously celebrates olive trees' invincibility in the face of subjugation and mocks human hubris that foolishly tries to master nature. Mark O'Connor (b. 1945) is an ardent eco-poet from Australia. Most of his poetry collections revolve around nature, environment and conservationism. Ever since he published his first collection, *Reef Poems* (1976) he has come out as a staunch environmentalist. He has published sixteen books of poetry and a volume of collected poems, *The Olive Tree* (2000). He is also called Olympic poet as he was granted a fellowship by the Australian Council to compose poetry for the 2000 Olympic Games held in Sydney. He is also the editor of the scholarly *Two Centuries of Australian Poetry* (1996) published by Oxford University Press. The poem 'The Olive Tree' was published in *The Olive Tree: Collected Poems of Mark O'Connor* (2000).

Nature poetry usually brings to mind the Romantic poetry of William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). Even though Connor admires romantic poetry he feels that they lack "scientific insight" (Triakha 139). He further adds, "Wordsworth's musings on nature would have gone deeper if he had included predation and parasitism in his vision of how the natural world achieves its marvellous balance" (ibid., 139). Connor says, "We need to see the non-human world as something clear, and valuable. .

. But good poetry does not preach, and I try in my poetry not to preach but rather to show. To make vivid (ibid., 145).

The Olive Tree

On the surface level, the poem 'The Olive Tree' talks about the longevity of the olive tree and its resilience. At the symbolic level, the poem celebrates nature's ability to revive, despite all kinds of natural calamities and human efforts to destroy it. The poem describes the olive tree from whose branches the garlands of the victorious athletes were made in the ancient Olympiads. The poet begins by saying that nobody knows how long an olive tree lives because: "Drought, axe, fire" (Singh 29) have all proved to be failures in the destruction of olive trees.¹ Even when an olive is hacked down, and its main root dug out for fuel, shoots will spring out from the side roots in the spring. Sometimes, the tree is left leafless for years due to frost, but they revive again. Invading armies can fell them down for their war vehicles, but the trees return to life through the debris of the war machine.

Nobody knows how long it takes to kill an olive.

Drought, axe, fire, are admitted failures. Hack one down,
grub out a ton of mainroot for fuel, and next spring
every side-root sends up shoots (ibid., 29).

Sometimes, the tree is left leafless for years due to a "great frost" (ibid., 29), yet they revive again. Sometimes, invading armies fell them down to make way for their war vehicles. But, the trees reappear through the debris and the burnt-out remains of the vehicles.

A great frost

can leave the trees leafless for years; they revive.

Invading armies will fell them. They return
through the burnt-out ribs of siege machines.

Only the patient goat, nibbling his way down the ages,
has malice to master the olive. Sometimes, they say,

a man finds a dead orchard, fired and goat-
cropped centuries back. He settles and fences;
the stumps revive. His grandchildren's family prosper
by the arduous oil-pressing trade. Then wars
and disease wash over. Goats return. The olives
go under, waiting another age.

Their shade still lies where Socrates disputed.
Gethsemane's withered groves are bearing yet (ibid., 29).

Goats nibbles up the leaves of the tree leaving it bare. Sometimes, a man comes across a dead orchard of olive trees that were destroyed by fire or goats centuries ago. He settles down at that place and fences it. Over some time the stumps of the dead olive trees revive again. The family of this man prosper through the olive oil business. Then again there's a natural calamity of war. Olive orchard might get destroyed and gets buried under the ground only to reappear in another age. This cycle of destruction and renewal goes off endlessly. Socrates who lived two thousand years ago lectured under an olive tree that lives to this day. In the garden of Gethsemane, Christ spent a night.

According to Singh and Sharma (2013), the themes of the poem is "resilience of nature, which despite all kinds of calamities or efforts to demolish it, revive again in due course of time" (28). They also opine that the second part of the poem stresses on the theme of "nature as nurturer or sustainer of humankind. . . This section also evokes the theme of the eternal cycle of nature where death or destruction is followed by birth or revival" (28). They further add,

'The Olive Tree' is particularly rich in the echoes of meaning in the evocative use of words. The resilience of the olive tree is also suggestive of the resilience of the human will which refuses to be crushed down however heavy or destructive the odds may be against it. Hence the olive tree becomes a symbol of the invincible human will which may have to be dormant or passive at times but finally it gets resurrected and starts afresh. As the olive branch is also

a symbol of peace, of ending conflict or dispute, the poem also seems to suggest that despite violence and destruction peace will always conquer in the end (28).

Environmental activism of Mark O' Connor

Connor's environmental activism is very significant in Australian Literature in a time of ever-increasing environmental crisis (Hall 22). Ecocritics are on a mission to convince humanity to change its ways and not fall prey to hubris. Sharma (2006) says, " O'Connor's poetry is a pleading against the brutal, consumerist attitudes of man towards his breeder-Earth" (71). She adds "His poetry is against the human chauvinism, an 'ism' that considers man to be the most vital and superior being on the earth" (73). Ever since Rachel Carson published her landmark book *Silent Spring* in 1962 to show the dangers of pesticide used by a human being, ecocriticism has emerged as a means of analyzing nature viz-a-viz literature. One of the major contributions of ecocriticism is that ardently supports the appreciation of nature and environmental bonding (Platz 256). Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) defined ecocriticism as,

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate level of sophistication, an ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnection between nature and culture. Understanding how nature and culture constantly influence and construct each other is essential to an informed ecocriticism. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land. As a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and non-human (xix).

Cheryll Glotfelty who is the founder of ASLE (American Association for Literature and Environment) also says about ecocriticism that "While in most literary theory 'the world' is synonymous with society – the social sphere – ecocriticism expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere" (xix). It favours a biocentric approach and a wider conception of what constitutes 'community' to make space for biotic as well as abiotic life forms and the physical environment.

Invincibility of Nature

Ellis Dana Hunnes (2014) says “Each animal and plant has a place in the web of life. I’d like to say humans have a place in the web of life too. But mostly, it seems like human’s place is in the web of death.” Similarly, Hess (2010) opines,

This tendency to locate “nature” apart from ourselves skews our environmental awareness and priorities in ways that blind us to the devastating ecological impact of our own everyday lives and incapacitate us from pursuing realistic alternatives (85).

‘The Olive Tree’ uses the olive tree as a traditional symbol of endurance against destructive forces and subjugation. According to Rachael Turner,

He has accumulated the many things that are incompetent of killing an olive tree elucidating just how determined they are at overpowering man. Hack one down, chow out a ton of main root for furl, and next spring every side-root sends up shoots. O’Connor has depicted visually these connotations of just how in destructive these trees are, despite are the treatment it is being subject to. O Connor has do reference to the prolonged period of time these olive trees has been persistent in overcoming mans many obstacles. Burnt-out ribs of military blockade machines not only highlights how long these olive trees have been standing for, but also how the tree has deluge the old-timed machines and gone and lived another age. The distinctively visual images used here can encapsulate this theme and gives readers a deeper understanding of the tenacity these olive trees are willing to relinquish. O’Connor is fascinated by just how much human beings underestimate nature. The smallest creatures can overcome any adversity and the dullest of trees can overpower any man. Nature, if it wants to, can be just as powerful as man.

The poem seems to superficially deal with the outer physical world, but it can also be read as a metaphoric exploration of human interference and its failure. Humans trample olive trees and believe they’re doing it sustainably because it will eventually grow back. And all this while recognising olive as a traditional symbol of fertility, triumph, peace and prosperity.

Critique of Human Hubris

According to Nadine Andrews (2014) “project of modernity, and at its core are anthropocentric beliefs that humans are separate from nature, that humans have primacy over and are superior to nature, and that humans are morally entitled to exploit nature for their own ends.” Ecocriticism takes an inter-disciplinary view of environment and literature. It underlines the amalgamation of humans and nature. There is no attempt to isolate one from the other. According to Gavala (2019),

Ancient Greeks believed that what follows Hubris is Nemesis & Tisis. Hubris being a human action that stems from one’s overestimation of own power and attempt to transcend its mortal nature, resulting in (unethical) behaviour, going against the unwritten laws of the universe. Hence, insulting the gods and provoking their outrage (nemesis) and finally the hubris’ agent destruction (tisis), that originated on the first place, from his own reckless, greedy and careless actions. Doesn’t this trio of self-destruction capture the human attitude towards the planet?

Throughout human history, man has placed himself at the centre of all creations. It was once accepted and truly believed that man is the centre of the universe. But, now it has been proven by science that earth is nothing but a speck in the vast cosmos. Given the situation, isn’t the desire to surmount nature foolish? According to Cade (2016),

This alienating rift places humanity as separate from that biosphere instead of part of it, and O’Connor’s desire to close the gap, to drag together and reconcile, is shared by such ecopoets as the Australian Susan Hawthorne. . .the rift between humanity and the biosphere is ever widening. In this, he tends more toward prophecy than activism, resembling Blake as much as his Australian contemporaries in his images of fully alienated humanity (92).

Cade (2016) also opines that Ecological degradation is in O’Connor’s poems the polar opposite of conscious creation; it is the deliberate, if often careless, destruction of an extraordinary environment (99). Similarly, Stephens (2012) says,

Perhaps this is the great hubris of recent human history—the assumptions of the anthropocentric view of the global ecosystem: seeing our planet only for its services or its threats, and viewing ourselves as somehow external to the integrity of the ecosystem. And our most profound arrogance

is in the assumption that we understand the implications of our destruction of biodiversity for the well-being of future generations (3).

This is exactly the point that the poem 'The Olive Tree' makes. Humans have failed to appreciate the marvels and gifts of nature. They miserably fail to acknowledge, for example, that all species of plants and animal and the entire biosphere is interrelated and that it's foolish to even try to master nature. Man is and always will be subject to laws of nature. Everything in the cosmos is interrelated and inter-dependent. Phil Anderson (2017) says,

Our hubris (and medieval religious beliefs) blind us to the consequences of our actions. When we ignore climate change, or the increasing extinction of other species, or the possibility of nuclear holocaust forever altering the planet, we imperil our own species. As the book "World Without Us" by Alan Weisman suggests, if humans suddenly disappeared from the earth our grandiose human infrastructure would begin crumbling within days. Although our trash and the ruins our cities would remain for some time, the earth would quickly heal from the "wounds" of human "civilization." The earth will survive no matter what we do to it. The question is: will we?

Conclusion

Using the olive tree as a symbol, Connor tries to bring out the phoenix-like quality of nature that despite all kinds of calamities and failed efforts to destroy it has the unfailing ability to revive. The eternal cycle of nature's destruction and subjugation followed by its revival continues seamlessly. The human hubris is mocked for its reckless, rash and injudicious use of nature.

Endnotes

¹The references are from Singh (2013), p. 29.

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