

SONGLINES- A WANING CULTURAL VESTIGE: AN ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *THE SONGLINES*

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Abstract

"The Songlines" by Bruce Chatwin is an exposure to the Aboriginaltsuringa-tracks, or songlines. Chatwin has attempted to create a whole new Australia with an aboriginal grounding. Chatwin in this travel writing, is present as an author with Arkady an half Russian, Australian citizen. It is through their eyes that we see the aboriginals; the original inhabitants of Australia and their culture. In theory, at least, the whole of Australia could be read as a musical score. There was hardly a rock or creek in the country that could not or had not been sung. One should perhaps visualise the Songlines as a spaghetti of Iliads and Odysseys, writhing this way and that, in which every "episode" was readable in terms of geology. An ecocritical analysis of the text will be undertaken here, that would reflect the intricate relationship between the land, the people and their culture. This paper will focus on how aboriginal culture and the physical landscape of Australia was disregarded and desecrated by the colonisers.

Key Words: Songlines, Aboriginal, ecocritical, culture, Vestige, Colonisers...

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“Human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.”(pg.19) this observation by Cheryl Glotfelty in the Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* where she comprehensively lays the framework for the Ecocritical approach to literary studies, is most pertinent in the context of this paper. The impact of imperialism on the Australian aboriginal cultural vestige, the Songlines or creation songs that were inherited and learned by the aboriginals from their ancestors, will be studied here.

The songlines, Chatwin writes, describe “an interlocking network of ‘lines’ or ‘ways through’.” It’s necessary to remember these lines, because straying from them could mean death. And because most of the Australian Outback “was arid scrub or desert where rainfall was always patchy and where one year of plenty might be followed by seven years of lean,” people had to move about and rely on exchange with neighbors. “Every tribe-like it or not- had to cultivate relations with its neighbour.” In hunter-gatherer societies, intimate knowledge of the landscape and its amenities was the key to survival. Children were taught their songs at a young age by their mothers in the form of stories and with the help of sketches in the sand. Today, we have become so reliant upon paper maps, Internet, and GPS systems that one wonders how we can make it across the street unaided, let alone navigate an entire city, region, or continent. Unfortunately, many songlines were lost during the colonial encroachment of the 19th and early 20th centuries, but thankfully many others exist to this day, preserving the living link between the land and the people who have lived on it for tens of thousands of years.

An ecocritical analysis of the text will be undertaken here, that would reflect the intricate relationship between the land, the people and their culture. This paper will focus on how aboriginal culture and the physical landscape of Australia was disregarded and desecrated by the colonisers. A manifestation of ecological imperialism that is-

environmental racism- can be seen at play in colonies like Australia. Ecological Imperialism, defined by the American environmental philosopher Deane Curtin as “the connection, in theory and practice, of race and the environment so that the oppression of one is connected to, and supported by, the oppression of the other.”(*Introduction-* Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin).

The unhappy marriage between culture, civilization and nature is expressed by Walter Benjamin in one of his Theses on the Philosophy of History, where he observes that to the ‘historical materialist, there is ‘no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’. (Kate Rigby)

Kate Rigby supports this argument by saying that there is also no work of culture which is not simultaneously exploitative of nature. She adds that it is through the prism of culture that we perceive nature. It would be interesting to study the influence of Marxist theory on environmental history, where economics determines social history, thus capitalism becomes the source for all conflict (William Howarth). Clearly, economics was the driving force for the colonisers and they felt they bestowed ‘gifts’ of culture and civilization to the pagans, heathens who they felt had, none to call their own.

It would be interesting to illustrate an incident in this context that Neil Evernden has discussed in the essay *Beyond Ecology*, which discusses the practical, utilitarian and insensitive approach to the environment and its inhabitants which is fuelled by Western dualistic thinking. He recalls an incident sitting at a long cafeteria table with some other biologists discussing with righteous indignation the proposal that a rail road be built through Wood Buffalo National Park in Northern Canada.

The railway line would have run through the nesting ground of the only remaining Whooping Cranes of which there were only eighteen at the time. It seemed unbelievable to Neill Evernden and his sensitive friends that anyone could even suggest something like this. But someone at the table forced to listen their tirade turned to them and questioned “So what good are the Whooping Cranes?” What annoyed him the most was he couldn’t think of a single use of the Whooping Cranes as they didn’t sing or eat harmful insects-nor were they a tourist attraction.

The argument in favour of the cranes was termed as one burdened with sentimentality and 'impractical' attitude towards a natural resource. In the context of the Songlines such questions regarding their 'practical' significance must have been raised, overlooking the fact these songlines also served as the trade route, where songs not things were the principal medium of exchange. Trading in things was the secondary consequence of trading in songs.

Going back to the impact of ecological imperialism, Crosby discusses it to be in its worst form in settler colonies, where genuine curiosity about and respect for indigenous cultures, philosophies and religions was rare, and even the most well intentioned of missionaries, settlers and administrators tended to conceive themselves as conferring (or imposing) the gifts of civilization upon the benighted heathen with little or no interest in receiving his or her philosophical gifts in return.

Thus, land that was not tended was considered as wild land and was cleared for farming.

In fact, in pre-invasion Australia, the nature of the environment had dictated nomadism as the only way of life for both people and animals. In Australia and South Africa the growing number of colonists regarded the lands they occupied as theirs by right, while the alleged nomadism of the Indians suggested to them that there was no native interest in land ownership. It is these attitudes of the whites and presumptions that Chatwin has tried to uncover in *The Songlines*.

The aborigines who inherited and learned the creation songs, each specific to their totem, could navigate for hundreds of miles across featureless desert by singing the song in time with their steps, and they could recognise every real feature of the landscape as they sang it. These songlines represented the journeys of the ancients with each succeeding generation knowing, remembering and perpetuating these songs sung by their ancestors. As they sung out the name of everything that crossed their paths- birds, animals, plants, rocks, water holes and so on thus singing the world into existence.

The native Australians couldn't see anything imperfect in the world created by their ancestors, their single 'religious aim' in life was 'to keep the land the way it was'. This is what the colonisers disregarded in their mad bid for progress. Laying down tracks for the railways was out of favour of the aboriginals. Chatwin refers to the chief engineer being wary of the Aboriginals while laying the track on a three hundred mile strip of country, the last stretch of track to be laid in Australia; for the rumpus that broke out whenever a mining company moved its machinery into Aboriginal land as they didn't want a single sacred site of theirs to be destroyed.

A similarity between Native American Pueblos can be found here. Like the native Australians, the American Pueblos also had specific clan emblems -for instance belonging to the Wallaby emblems or the Sun Clan, Lizard Clan or Corn Clan. The parallels of having specific origins or tracing common ancestors, tracing the lineage back to the emergence where their ancestors allied themselves with certain plants or animals or elements is common to animistic societies.

These societies almost without exception had avoided environmental destruction. Animism as a system broke down due to literacy and Christian exegesis (Lynn White has put forth this argument in the essay, *Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* which has been contested by Kate Rigby)

The 'masculinist', 'reason oriented' culture that once helped secure and sustain European imperial dominance, is represented by the entire gamut of opinions the white Australians have towards the Aboriginals in Chatwin's *Songlines*.

The missionaries display antagonism towards the natives and consider them to be primitive and childlike. Their ignorance of the Gospel has cut them from the main stream of humanity and has forced them to keep fighting amongst themselves. A white police patrolman feels that the natives had different water works, so there should be different drinking rules for them. He hated the whites who fought for Aboriginal land rights as they stood in the way of progress and helped in the destruction of white Australia.

Chatwin also introduces us to a character Eileen Houston of the Aboriginal Arts Bureau who knows how to make money out of Abo art. At the same time Chatwin also introduces us to the Aboriginals who manipulate their Tjuringas (an oval-ended plaque,carved from stone or mulgawood, covered with patterns representing the wanderings of its owner's Dream time Ancestor) to line their pockets.

In this travel writing Chatwin doesn't assume the traditional western approach of patronising the Rousseauian noble savages. The Aboriginals are not presented here as innocent victims, but at the same time his work forces us to think of ways to preserve the cultural heritage. A possible solution could be taking recourse to the thought expressed by Bill Devall, the co-author of *Deep Ecology*, who suggests that deep ecology involves learning a new language. In an attempt to reanimate nature, we must have the courage to learn the new language, even if it puts at risk the privileged discourse of reason. This language has to be free from an obsession with human pre-eminence and relearning metaphorically "the language of the birds"-the passions, pains, and cryptic intents of the other biological communities that surround us and silently interpenetrate our existence.(Manes) Thus, suggesting a way of narrowing the ecological gap between the coloniser and the colonised.

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