

Protest in the Poetry of Kath Walker

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The aim of this paper is to analyze Kath Walker's poetry within the perspective of protest tradition because of its overt social and political message. Her poetry will be examined in the context of the social, political and cultural crises of the Aboriginal Australian people.

Kath Walker (1920-1993) is an Aboriginal (Native) Australian poet, writer and activist. Her poetry criticizes the long term effects of white colonialism on her people in Australia. It focuses on topics such as white racism and prejudice, political oppression and subordination, dispossession of Aboriginal land, the policy of assimilation and urbanization, and the annihilation of Aboriginal identity and culture.

Walker published three volumes of poetry; *We Are Going* (1964), *The Dawn is at Hand: Poems* (1966), and *My People: A Kath Walker collection* (1970). *We are Going* was the first book to be published by an Aboriginal writer. Critics indicate that contemporary Australian Aboriginal writing has begun in 1964 with the publication of *We Are Going*. The aim of this collection is to protest the injustices and wrongs committed by the white colonizers against the Aboriginals, and at the same time to encourage Aboriginals to remember their ancestral traditions with pride and self-respect.

Protest

Michael Lipsky defines protest as a “mode of political action oriented toward objection to one or more policies or conditions.” People resort to protest in order to express their anger against social ills like corruption, deprivation, frustration, injustice, oppression, racial discrimination or marginalization etc.... Protest can lead to a positive change and transformation in a given society inflicted with such social ills.

Protest Literature

Protest literature is an art that can be used to criticize society of its social ills. Protest literature aims at social transformation because it can be directed towards changing a wrong system and it can help awakening people to the injustices around them. Protest literature has the power to “offer revelations of social worlds to which readers respond with shock, concern, sometimes political questioning.”

A short review of the colonial experience in Australia is necessary to understand the theme of protest in the poetry of Kath Walker. Genocide, oppression, suppression of native culture, language, traditions and dispossession of land which has left many Aboriginal people living as ' fringe dwellers in their own land are the main characteristics of the Australian colonial history and experience. This history started in 1787 when the British Parliament, ruling Australia as terra nullius, i.e. nobody's land, chose Botany Bay as the site of a prison because the “. . . newly United States of America has refused to continue accepting shipments of British prisoners.”

This decision provided a 'legal' authorization for the colonization and settlement of Australia over the course of the next few hundred years. The colonization and submission of Aboriginal Australians was a long and tragic process. Bloody Wars and dissemination of diseases decimated the Aboriginal population as colonizers overtook traditional lands for themselves. Colonies and reservations were established and Aboriginals pushed off their land onto confined Reservations that were insufficient for their physical and spiritual needs. By 1920 the Aboriginal population was widely believed to be a 'dying race'.

Walker herself is proud of being a protest poet, saying that “I’m dead the day I stop protesting.” In the poem entitled “We Are Going”, which is perhaps her most loud protest against socio-economic ills and which Walker herself regarded as a protest poem, she denounces dispossession of native land and the resultant cultural dislocation and displacement suffered by the Aboriginal Australians:

They came in to the little town
A semi-naked band subdued and silent
All that remained of their tribe.
They came here to the place of their old bora ground
Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.
Notice of the estate agent reads: 'Rubbish May Be Tipped Here'.
Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring.
They sit and are confused, they cannot say their thoughts:
'We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are the
strangers. (*My People*, 78)

The opening lines tell much about the current miserable living circumstances of the Aboriginals; people who were once the native inhabitants of the land are now suffering from displacement and poverty reflected in 'semi-naked'. Moreover, the lines indicate the fact that the Aboriginals were 'subdued' and 'silent' because of colonial oppression over them. Moreover, the dispossession of their land has led to the loss of their cultural identity.

The Aboriginals had come to their native land to see for the last time their sacred 'Bora ground'. A bora ring is a sacred circle of ground "where certain ceremonies are performed by the Aborigines." They were shocked to see that their sacred ground was not respected when it was changed into a white residential area. Their shock was worsened when they discovered that this 'Bora ground' had been turned into a waste collection point. They are emotionally confused to realize that they are now strangers in their land because of the white colonizers.

Walker links the dispossession of land to the erasure of the old traditional rituals and ceremonies. Losing land for the Aboriginals has resulted in a loss of their heritage and culture because they were so deeply connected with it. Land strongly reflects the social, economic, political, and cultural links that the Aboriginal people have.

In "We Are Going", Walker laments the discontinuity and destruction of the strong ritualistic and spiritual links between the Aboriginal people and their land, "We are nature and the past, and the old ways/ Gone now and scattered."(*My People*, 78) To keep alive the Aboriginal traditional rituals, Walker lists the various cultural features that make the Aboriginal true identity:

**We belong here, we are of the old ways.
We are the corroboree and the bora ground,
We are the old sacred ceremonies, the laws
of the elders.
We are the wonder tales of Dream Time, the
tribal legends told.**

Walker is adopting here a collective voice of the surviving Aboriginals who struggle to sustain their traditional ways. Her use of the pronoun 'We' reveals a desire to be the speaker and the voice of her culturally dislocated people .

In addition to the dispossession of their land and their resultant cultural dislocation, Walker grieves in "We Are Going" the destruction of natural environment and its intrusion by the White man:

**The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.
The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone
from this place.
The bora ring is gone.
The corroboree is gone. (*My People*, 78)**

The two traditional symbols of Australia, The 'emu' and ' kangaroo', are no longer extant now because the white man caused destruction to Aboriginal nature. As their native lands, animals and sacred sites are 'gone', the Aboriginals realize that they themselves are doomed to annihilation .The poem ends with a sad declaration of forced withdrawal 'And we are going'.

In her poetry, Walker also protests the various malpractices of the Australian government against the Aboriginals:

**We want hope, not racialism,
Brotherhood, not ostracism,
Black advance, not white
ascendance:
Make us equals, not dependents.
We need help, not exploitation,
We want freedom, not frustration;
Not control, but self-reliance,
Independence, not compliance**

Conclusion

Kath Walker aimed to use poetry as a voice of protest against the long term effects of white colonization of Australia. She expressed grievances and concerns of her people for the suffering they have because of racial discrimination, subjugation, exploitation, inequality, and the dispossession of their land. She laments and mourns the cultural dislocation of her people and the discontinuity and the decline of their spiritual beliefs and traditional practices due to their displacement from their lands. Her protest poetry calls for improvement in the social, economic, cultural and political conditions of her people. It also affirms the importance for the assertion of native identity through the revival of old traditional ways of Aboriginal life and by insisting on the continuity of past and present. These calls prove that protest poetry can be used as a vital and indispensable tool for a positive change in the life of Aboriginal peoples all over the world.