

Native Voices from Terra Nullius: A Heading of Kath Walker's *"We are Going"*

- **B.C. Anish Krishnan Nayar**

Kath Walker (1920-1993), later known as Oodgeroo Nosnuccal opened a new, hitherto undefined area in Australian literature aboriginal poetry. Her collection of poems "We are Going" (1964) was the first book to be published by an Aboriginal woman. She was not only a poet, but a political activist too. She fought hard for the aboriginal rights. She was a forerunner in that field too. This paper is an attempt to analyse Walker's eponymous poem "We are Going". The paper throws light on the subaltern elements in the poem.

A brief account of colonization of Australia is essential to appreciate this poem. The ill fate of the aborigines started when Captain James Cook 'discovered' Australia in late eighteenth century. He found that the aborigines of Australia were leading a simple, peaceful life and he records in his diaries that they were not aggressive like the other tribes. During these days British Parliament was in search for a place to deport and dump their convicts as the ". . . newly minted United States of America has refused to continued accepting shipments of British prisoners" (Britain, 73). In 1787, the British Parliament decided to turn Australia into a penal colony. It ruled Australia as terra nullius, i.e. land belonging to no one's, brushing away the legal and sentimental claims of the aborigines. It took more than two hundred years to nullify this draconian law.

Kath Walker's poem "We are Going" reflects the pains of the sons of the soil who are unjustly thrown out of their native land. The poem is written as a collective voice of a few members of a surviving tribe. The poem is a painful farewell to their native land.

"We are Going" opens with a dedication to "Grannie Coolwell". The first two lines of the poems say: "They came into little town / a semi-naked band subdued and silent". The first two lines bring two painful facts to light. They are: 1) the aboriginals are displaced from their native land and 2) They were 'subdued' and silent. The word 'subdued' clearly indicator the colonial oppression over the natives. Silence of the natives is a recurrent image in the poem.

Further their living condition is suggested by the word 'semi-naked band'. People who were once the sole inhabitants of the continent were now more or less impoverished band of nomads. The natives had come to have a last look of their 'Bora ground' Bora grounds are sacred places for the aborigines. Most of the initiation rites take place in the Bora ground.

To their shock the natives found that the entire place was turned into a residential area where “white people moved like ants”. Their anguish reached the zenith when they found a sign reading. “Rubbish May Be tipped her”. There sacred place had been turned into a garbage collecting point.

The next few lines summarize the fate of not only aborigines, but that of all the colonised people.

“They sit and are confused, they cannot say their thoughts
We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are the
strangers
We belong here, we are old ways”

The native voice brings in a childlike flawless reasoning. The natives are made to feel as if they are strangers as all their heritage sites are ruthlessly destroyed by the colonisers. Confused by this, they ask how come they became strangers when it was actually the white people who are the strangers. This question echoes throughout the colonised world as this is a universal phenomena.

In the following lines the aborigines are equated with the elements of nature. The poem says: “We are nature and past, all the old ways / gone now and scattered”. These lines bring out the pathetic condition of the aboriginal people. People who are closely connected with the history and nature of the Australian continent are now ‘scattered’. They word ‘scattered’ suggest the fact that they are displaced and lift without any settlement area. Further it is written:

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
And we are going

The poem thus ends with a sad note of resignation. The Whites have not only destroyed the livelihood of natives but they have also caused irreparable damage to the nature. They have upset the environmental balance. Due to this reason the poem records the fact that the scrubs are gone and symbols of Australia such as emu and kangaroo are also almost extinct now. The natives used to have a peaceful coexistence with the nature. Their life was rather a symbiosis with the nature. After the loss of that symbiotic environment they are unable to survive. In addition to this they are oppressed by the colonizers. So with pangs of pain they say, “And we are going”. The poem thus powerfully

records the emotional anguish of the aboriginal people and evokes empathy in the heart of the reader.

The poem "We are Going" can be better understood if it is read in the light of Gayathri Chakravorthy Spivak's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?". The essay was written by Spivak in retaliation to the claims of subaltern studies group headed by Ranajith Guha. It is important to equate Spivak's essay with Walker's poem because "We are Going" is not only about the displacement and extermination of the natives but also about the politics in recording subaltern voices. The word subaltern was originally used in military to denote a low ranking, subordinate officer. In post-colonial theory the word 'subaltern' is used to refer to member of any group who face oppression due to caste or gender or race. Spivak clearly points out that a subaltern cannot speak and even if a subaltern speaks it cannot be or will not be heard by others. Spivak points out this with an illustration from the tragic life of one Bhuvaeswari Bhaduri. Spivak says: "She 'spoke', but women did not, do not, 'hear' her" (28). Hence the subaltern is forced to be silent. This subaltern silence is portrayed in "We are Going". The words such as "subdued and silent" and lines such as "They sit and are confused, they cannot say their thoughts" reinforce this idea. In fact the central idea of the poem is to highlight the silence of the aborigines. This silence is often taken for granted. Sneja Gunew points out that this 'silence' of the aborigines is often exploited. The aborigines are refused of their share not only in lands but also in literature. The whites successfully do this in the name of 'multiculturalism' which has become a tool of colonialism. However the silence of aborigines will turn into a strong resistance as silence is often louder than millions of words which are articulated with authority.

Quote goes here like this

“cannot and should not be privileged” (163), while Gary Catalano draws attention to Hart’s constant reminders “that we live in an obdurately material and physical world” (25).

Critics who are also published poets seem especially attracted to Hart’s work. To date, the majority of the criticism published on Hart has been written by other poets, including Gary Catalano, John Kinsella, Paul Kane, David McCooey and Paul Mitchell.

Notes

¹ The awareness of our responsibility for others results in anguish. As Sartre argues, “the existentialists say at once that man is anguish. What that means is this: the man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also a lawmaker who is

Works Cited

Walker, Kath. “We are Going”. <<http://www.cit.griffith.edu.au/>>. 30 May 2010.

Gunew, Sneja. “Denaturalizing Cultural Nationalisms: Multicultural Readings of ‘Australia’”. *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi.K.Bhabha. Routledge: New York, 2006. Print. (99-120).

Spivak, Gayathri Chakravorthy. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. Routledge: New York, 2009. Print. (28-37).

Brittan, Alice. “Australiasia”. *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. John McLeod. Routledge: New York, 2008. Print. (72-83).

B.C. Anish Krishnan Nayar

Ph.D. Scholar,
Centre for Research in English,
Scott Christian College,
Nagercoil,
Tamil Nadu, India