

AD Hope's "Australia" – A Critical reading

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Abstract:

A D Hope's "Australia" is a widely read and prescribed poem in India. While reading the poem through the lenses of postcolonial understanding, the poem assumes a different slant than its connotative meaning. One needs to know the background in which the poem was written. Hope dexterously combines the landscape of Australia with the mental scape of Australians in the poem. To understand the meaning of the poem, the first step would be to list out and segregate the terms that were used to define the land and the mental scape employed in the poem. This would enable a better understanding and critical analysis of the poem.

Keywords: AD Hope, Australia, Post-Colonial

A D Hope used the following terms to mention the landscape: trees, country, land without architecture, rivers drowning in the inland sands, five cities, shores, deserts, and green hills,

His choice of words for describing the mental-scape equally needs attention: nation, lie, emotions, superstitions, stupidity, monotonous, ultimate, boast, human mind, and alien, emptiest, young, and old. It is pertinent to note that all these terms are subjective and a product of attitude.

The focus now has to shift our attention to the amalgamation of the land and the mental scopes in the poem. This demands a close reading of the poem and such word phrases are listed here: drab green, desolate grey, endless outstretched paws, younger lands, river of immense stupidity, monotonous tribe, ultimate men, dying earth, parasite- robber state, second hand – Europeans, and cultured apes.

The choice of his metaphors needs to be identified before analyzing the poem. The nation of trees, 'trees ... in the field uniform of modern war' a woman, river of immense stupidity,

The simile that one finds is 'her five cities, like five teeming sores'

The rhyme scheme being ABBA, following iambic pentameter,

The opening words of the poem suggests that it is a nation of trees - the choice of the diction - nation over country - reveals that he was consciously drawing the readers' attention to the distinction between nation – an imaginary construct with that of country – a physical, geographical boundary.

The very term 'Australia' was coined by the settlers and not by the indigenous communities – the aborigines of the land. Hence, Hope attempts to bring forth the idea of Australia, which rests predominant in the minds of the white settlers. The physical reality of Australia filled with trees is also jarring the mental-scape of the people of Australia. The next two adjectives drab and desolate - they are attributed to colours green and grey. While the word drab refers to dull, lacking brightness, it also simultaneously means unattractive, lacking

interest. Alliterating with drab, Hope uses desolate as an adjective to grey colour. Though grey signifies death and moribund, the term 'desolate' contributes to the intensity of the colour by terming them empty with nothing living, invoking the feeling of extremely sad and lonely.

With such an opening line where he describes the colour, he moves on to compare the same colour to that of the field uniform of modern wars. The comparison to the uniforms also implies that there is no variety in the shades and the choice of the wars also portends that there is only conflict. The verb 'darkens' is alliterating with drab and desolate on the level of sounds, it also aligns itself with the mindscape by considering the hills covered by forests are uniform lacking variety, and being unattractive.

But describing the hills, he furthers the sombre mood by describing the hills to that of distant Sphinx of Egypt. Hope loses his hope even in the Sphinx by describing Sphinx as demolished or worn away. Everything about the notion of the nation Australia is presented in a more alliterate manner with the terms in the first stanza 'drab', 'desolate', 'darkens' and 'demolished' portending ominous.

The opening of the next stanza is critical. Here he opens with the word 'They'. With no apriori reference, Hope quoting them follows it by charging them with telling a lie. The information of who 'They' meant is crucial to understanding the poem. Who are they? And what is the telling? He follows the undescribed 'They' with an accusation that 'they lie.' They call her a young country, but they lie. Inverting the argument, the statement implies that the country is old. But the question remains, who are they? However, without deliberating on the question that 'They' refers to, he with a colon after lie, explains the lie that they propagate. Listing the lies, Hope furthers the

argument that Australia is 'the last of the lands, the emptiest.' Inverting this lie would read, that Australia is not last of the lands and it is occupied. The argument of 'terra nullius' propounded by the colonisers is destroyed by Hope by his statement that they lie. The analogy for Australia is again an old woman who cannot procreate "womb is dry" so it was more suggestive that they have to replenish as the tribes in Australia are not going to increase their population. The reason for colonisation is rationalised in next stanza where Hope continues to discuss the lie that is being propagated as Australia is considered to be a nation without songs, architecture, and history. If this is a lie then countering the argument is what that is not stated: Australia is a nation with songs, architecture and history. The statement begs the question: whose songs, whose architecture and whose history. He further states that the lie that is propagated is satirised by him by terming Europe's emotions and superstitions and effectively names Europe as younger lands contrasting with Australia as a older land.

In the next stanza, he blends geography with intelligence by clubbing the running of river to inland sands to dry like the river of stupidity. Floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth. In them at last the ultimate men arrive whose boast is not: 'we live' but 'we survive', A type who will inhabit the dying earth. He extends the lies propagated till he mentions the people who inhabit the dying earth as a 'type' of people.

Hope now becomes the ubiquitous narrator who now expresses his opinion. The poet jumps in to comment on the people who are now taking over Australia. He mentions that the urban expansion in Australia is likened to sores, that are draining the innards of Australia. The sores on a body - the analogy is that of Australia is now being compared to that of a body. While

earlier it was said to be that of a women with tender breast and dry womb, now the sores are further depleting her. He furthers the argument about what these Europeans are doing to the country Australia. They are draining the resources like a parasite and it being state sponsored. A dig at the ancestry of the people who are populating Australia from Europe - Hope calls them second hand Europeans - the choice of the term pullulate is very derogatory - the pullulate timidly on alien shores. Here by the choice of the diction alien shores, he reassures the readers that the land does not belong to them. By calling them second hand - he traces the history of the convicts being sent to Australia as a part of punishment and banning criminals from Europe and sending them to Australia.

In the beginning of the next stanza, he opens with a 'Yet,' delicately marking himself away from the second-hand Europeans who tell lies. Hope considers the modern thought waves of new thinking in Europe as a 'jungle of modern thought' - he considers the intense process of thinking and philosophical thought prevailing in Europe as a 'lush jungle' to find The Arabian desert of the human mind, Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come,

Hope considers cities to sores while he names the entire Australian landscape as drab, desolate, Hope having described the land of Australia to that of a dessert, strongly believes that it is from the deserts that prophets came and similarly in the deserts of Australia there is a possibility of a existence of prophets. But he is equally sceptical that even if there is a prophet his / her existence will not be noticed or escape the white people as the 'learned doubt' the indigenous communities - here again he calls the indigenous communities as 'cultured apes' and the learned people are those who call themselves civilized in their land.

There are in fact two positions from which the Hope had written the poem. Though the poet is the only position, he acknowledges the position of the Whites and looks at Australia from their perception. He shifts to his point of view at the juncture where he intervenes in the poem as a poet when he acknowledges, ' Yet there are some like me' it is at this point Hope comes in as a poet and the poem takes a personal note of the poet.

Though he positions a non-intrusive observance of the white people and their point of view he was simultaneously sceptical. By introducing a position of third person narrative like: 'In them at last the ultimate men arrive' he categorically is cynical and satirical. Contrasting the landscape that fits nothing why should the ultimate men arrive in those alien shores? To consider themselves as ultimate men, Hope points out that the self-description of those men who consider them to be ultimate by whose standards? Is it by culture? Civilization? or divine blessings? He refutes all these, culturally he calls them second hand Europeans and attaches a word pullulates, concerning the use of the word civilisation, he is sceptical as he describes the white government as a 'robber state' and about the religion beliefs or religious sanction, they may consider to be the ultimate in the creation on the earth, this overvaulting self-anointment as the ultimate men positions Europeans above all other human races. But Hope disengages the argument by considering the Europeans who had occupied Australia as deserts but only in these desserts will prophets emerge and when considering Europe to be younger land Hope recounts that they are emotional and superstitious.

Hope had a great regard for the indigenous communities in his mind and the great traditions and spiritual being of those communities. He acknowledges that it will be

difficult for Europeans to understand the 'cultured apes' as Europeans assume themselves to be ultimate men and therefore not able to see the great wisdom in the aborigines of Australia. Hope extricates himself from the European crowd when he identifies himself as a different person when he says: 'Yet there are some like me.'

The fundamental question is to understand what civilization is? Is it in the aboriginal homelands or with the Europeans? Hope calls the Europeans 'cultured apes' this unarguably leads us to the

understanding that though Hope presents the views from the indigenous and European perspectives, he is clearly on the side of the indigenous communities. Hope is expecting some wisdom to come from the indigenous communities and as of now the cultured apes are not able to comprehend the wisdom that is emanating from the indigenous lands.

Reference:

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