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Rebellion against the Culture of Stoicism and the Land in A.D. Hope's "Australia"

Ravindra Kumar

The basic Australian literary tradition is a compound of sound learning, rebelliousness, ardent faith in the common man, and an even more ardent faith in the Australian future (C. Hartley Grattan in *Introducing Australia*, New York, 1942).

The origin of Australian Poetry lays in the prison system. It was an outcome of the emotional turmoil the convicts were suffering in the prisons. By expressing their empathy through an artistic medium, the convicts were trying to maintain a degree of emotional distance from their turmoil as well as that of their friends. From this very foundation, a rich poetic tradition took birth on the Australian land. Basic Australian poetry is the poetry of anguish and rebellion but it also glorifies the nation. Poets like Kenneth Slessor who wrote during the war period portrayed a conflict between stoicism and anguish through their poems. Another poet Les Murray is also very critical of the Australian society as he revolts against the stoic culture of Australia.

A.D. Hope is another name in this line of Australian Poetry who is considered as one of the most influential and celebrated Australian poets of the twentieth century. He began his career as a lecturer at the University of Melbourne in 1945, and in 1951 he got the fortune to become the first Professor of English at the newly-founded Canberra University College. In 1968, he

was appointed Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University. He also served as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1972 and a Companion of the Order of Australia in 1981. Although he started writing at the age of 23 but his first collection of poems "The Wandering Islands" came out in 1955. Satire, lyricism, philosophical meditation and cheerful eroticism are the major concerns in his poetry. Some of his poems are metaphysical, sensual, serious, frivolous, mocking and mystical in nature. A number of critics recognize him as a classic poet who incorporates mythology, legends, and fables in his poetry. Despite the anachronistic nature of his poetry, critics praise his bitter satire and clarity of language which makes him an important figure in contemporary poetry. His poetic theory has forced many critics to view his verse as neoclassical, obsolete and too conservative. But in recent years, critics have reevaluated his verse, and have found great value in his formalized style. Critics have also noted a dearth of any identifiable Australian material in most of his work and perceive him as an outsider within the tradition of Australian literature. Eroticism and sexuality are the major concerns in the poetry of Hope; the theme of male chauvinism also runs deeply in many of his poems. But, despite being called old-fashioned and sexist by critics, his poetry continues to be anthologized and studied all over the world. It shows that as a poet, Hope's literary reputation remains strong. As an author Hope is a storyteller, teacher and an enchanter, the three attributes that Vladimir Nabokov considered essential in a writer. Kevin Hart states that "when A.D. Hope died in 2000 at the age of 93, Australia lost its living poet (Kevin Hart, A.D. Hope in the *Oxford Australian Writers Series*).

Hope is very critical of Australia and its society, culture, tradition and its people. Sometimes he is full of appreciation for Australia, but mainly he seems to be critical of the land. The aim of present paper is to show rebellion against the culture of stoicism and the land in the poem Australia by A.D. Hope. Hope shows a large amount of scope on his ability to comment on Australian society, its landscape and the forces shaping it. Although many of his poems glorify the country, some contain the themes of rebellion, not against authorities but against the



culture of stoicism and the land itself. The poem shows bitter criticism of Australia and its people. Hope had been a frequent visitor and explorer of the eastern Australian land in his later years. This poem is most probably a result of his observations of this particular Australian area. The poem contains seven stanzas, each stanza consisting of four lines with the rhyme scheme (Ab ab). The first stanza portrays Australia as "a nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey" that "darkens her hills". Here Australia is presented as a bleak and almost colorless nation because everything in it is dull and without any color. This deterioration resembles the "field uniform of modern wars" where almost all the objects are in shade of "endless, outstretched paws of Sphinx demolished or stone lion worn away".

The field is equivalent to the modern wars and the mountains are thick and dark. The Sphinx is a mythical figure with human's head and the body of a lion laying outside Thebes, asking travellers a riddle and killing them if is not answered. It killed itself when King Oedipus solved the riddle. The Sphinx is seen as a creature of great wisdom. This comparison is directly linked to Hope's vision of Australia which was at her intellectual height once upon a time. But now the glorious past has faded away and the reputation of Australia has considerably declined. The next stanza presents a negative image of Australia. The poet feels that the people who consider Australia a young nation are not giving the real picture of the land. Rather they, according to Hope, lie. It is an old country and "the last of lands, the emptiest". It is "a woman beyond her change of life, a breast still tender but within the womb is dry". The lines suggest that Australia may be considered a young nation by the world's standards, yet it is the most empty. It can be compared to a woman who is fresh and alert outwardly but from the inside is empty as it possesses nothing.

She has tender feelings but her womb is dry. The poet feels that Australia is devoid of internal beauty. In the next stanza, Hope calls Australia a land that is devoid of culture. To him Australia is "without songs, architecture and history" where the "rivers of water drown among inland sands, the river of her immense stupidity". Hope feels that Australia has neither any

culture to boast of nor any historical background nor culture to speak off. Yet he feels that it has the capabilities to do so. However, the ideas are drowned among "inland sands". The poet portrays a true picture of Australia that is a barren and empty land. It is able to sustain life but almost unable to produce it. This is evident from the fact as he blames the detractors for the slow erosion of Australia, where it has turned into a country that is no longer as wise as it used to be once upon a time. The island sand dries all the water which he calls "the river of her immense stupidity". This reflects Hope's patriotic feelings for his nation where, the poet feels, Australia is a victim of circumstances. The very next portrayal of Australia is very bleak as it is portrayed as a nation that is nothing at all and where there are "monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth". The poet feels that before the colonization of Australia, monotonous tribes lived here. Large number of people arrived from Cairns to Perth city. He is more critical about the Australian people showing them monotonous tribes who boast not of living but rather boast of merely surviving.

In the next stanza, the poet compares the five main cities of Australia to "five teeming sores." Perhaps the poet is trying to affirm that the people who move here are rather unwelcome, and they are "second hand Europeans" that give birth rapidly on these "alien shores." He sees these inhabitants as people for "drain" Australia, a "vast parasite robber state." This could be well connected to Australia's past history when it was Great Britain's exile island. Dangerous and hard core criminals were sent here in exile instead of sending them to the prisons. Hope is most probably trying to put forth that the newcomers coming to Australia are like giant leeches that take in all that is good in the country. It simply means that Australia is reduced to a vast parasite robber-state that breeds a timid race of second hand Europeans.

Unfortunately these mediocre citizens have become the heroes of the nation now. His notions of patriotism are well reflected in the last two stanzas where he feels that there are "some like me (him) who turn gladly home" to withdraw from the "lush jungle of modern thought" in order to seek the "Arabian desert of the



human mind." The poet enjoys retreating from the materialistic mundane world and wishes to stay in a rather desert. It means that all the above-mentioned detractions can be considered as additional benefits of being an Australian. Here Hope seems to paradoxically redeem Australia and hopes for a savage and scarlet sprit which will spring from the bush country tradition. The last two lines need special attention of readers where Hope states "the learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes" which is merely called civilization without it really being so. The poet presents a vivid image of Australia and states that in the name of growth and civilization, they have buried their own culture. The intellectual development of Australia is being done at the cost of their own true culture. Perhaps he explores with a negative and myopic approach and presents the spiritual barrenness of the land.

Reading the poem from the 20th century context gives us an entirely different meaning. The poem makes less sense now that the second hand Europeans is now just a proportion of the melting pot of cultures: multi-cultural society. What the poet misses in the poem is the distinct style of art, architectural society and culture for which Australia is well known all over the world.

The poem has seven stanzas, each stanza consisting of four lines with the rhyme scheme AbAb. The first five stanzas state how Australia is both a new and old country-geologically old politically new. The stanzas also state how it is both European colonial and naturally individual.

Hope was of the view that poetry was philosophical music, and his works dramatize the ways in which a philosophical argument is best represented by analogy. He believed that all great poems include within their music an argument of some kind. Australia is one such poem in which he assumes that the land may be rich and prosperous on the surface but beneath it lays distortion of culture and tradition. Though the poem received much criticism but it remains one of his most discussed poems even today.

Works Cited

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