

Land as “Terrain of the Conscious” in David Malouf’s *Fly Away Peter*

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David Malouf an internationally acclaimed Australian writer is the author of *The Great World*. He is a winner of the Commonwealth Prize. He has also been short-listed for the Booker prize for his book *Remembering Babylon*. He has scripted plays written poetries, fiction and autobiographies. He is well known for his lyrical and condensed way of writing. His themes varied from war, nature, landscapes, innocence and experience. The novel, *Fly Away Peter*, is set when war breaks into Australia and when all the young men from Australia get to Brisbane leaving behind their homes in the rural land. The novel based on war pictures the crude reality of how the war turned the environment and the society to be. The novel is a challenge to mankind of how they perceive nature at the outbreak of war and the introduction of industries.

Ecocriticism plays a vital role in understanding the relationship between nature and human being. Suresh Frederick says, “Ecocriticism is totally opposed to the anthropocentric view, i.e., the human-centered view, subscribed to by many human beings. It supports the biocentric view. The human-centered view is beneficial to humans but the biocentric view is beneficial to both humans and the biosphere. (Balachandran 14). Land ethic is a part of Ecocriticism. “Land ethic is a way of dealing with land. Human beings relate to flora, fauna, soil, climate mountains, rivers etc. in a biocentric way and communities are fundamentally built upon ecology”(Moses 37).

“The expression “ecology” is infused with many meanings. Here, it means the interdisciplinary scientific study of the living conditions of organisms in interaction with each other and with the surroundings, organic as well as inorganic” (Naess 36).

The happenings of the war revolved around destruction and invention, destruction of natural land and invention of machines exploiting the natural resources. This gave people a future filled with mechanical living and machinery. The newly developing phase of the world deviated people’s attention from the natural world into a culture which looked for a lifestyle that matched the society they live in. Thus taking into account the social, political, geographical and environmental issues Bioregionalism

deals with human and nature, and their relationship in a more practical way. A bioregion is where humans lookout to occupy a region without disturbing its natural abilities. It demands a proper knowledge of the land they occupy. It is this knowledge of the locale among the natives in the locality that would lead them to claim the landscape and not the borders they create. The landscape thus shared leads to co-existence with nature and communal living among them. A bioregion is thus a region where humans are only occupants and never masters.

Denying scientific or rational thoughts, Malouf presents a novel with characters that looks up to the environment around them. Their reliance on the local region is seen to instil a responsibility which helps them to be co-existent with the environment. “Listen,’ he said, ‘how would you like to work for me? How would you-‘.....’How would you like’, he said, ‘to do all this on a paper basis?’” (Malouf 18). The author presents his protagonist with a commitment to his region which helps him know the region and its elements intimately. “Where did you learn?’ he asked, out of where his own thoughts had led him... Jim found it difficult to explain that it was almost a sense he had, inexplicable even to himself” (Malouf 18). He could list the name of the birds that flew across with the help of their characteristic features and behaviour. As Gary Snyder states, “It is not enough to just ‘love nature’ or to want to ‘be in harmony with Gaia.’ Our relationship to the natural world takes place in a place, and it must be grounded in information and experience” (Dunlap 112). Even when the whole country was burning with war and war signs Jim’s mind was found to be held back in the world of the sanctuary of birds because of the knowledge of his immediate environment and its appreciation. This sense of place shared with two other characters namely Ashley and Imogen developed in them a communal living along with the environment as they shared a closely packed environment.

People connected with industrialized society lack this knowledge of the immediate environment because of their anthropocentric view of the land. The anthropocentric view is much prevalent in a scattered or loosely connected society rather than a closely knit healthy environment. For instance, when Jim Saddler meets Ashley Crowther at the beginning of the novel, they were of two different perspectives, as Ashley is a person who has just returned to Australia from a well-developed country like England while Jim is a person who never left Australia. Ashley in the beginning could never make any sense of the small world and its interconnected environment he is now in. “They shocked him each time he came here with the otherness of their being. He could never quite accept that they were, he and these creatures of the same world. It was as if he had inherited a piece of the next world, or some previous one.” (Malouf 33). His inability to share with other forms of life scared him even of being robbed of his own land. “...they moved with their little lives, if they moved at all, so transiently across his lands-even when they were natives and spent their whole lives there-and knew nothing of Ashley Crowther” (Malouf 33). However, the relationship that Jim extended towards the

other forms of life and his immediate knowledge of the environment inspired Ashley to rediscover his ecological self. As Drengson, a professor says man can better realize nature and his own self if he can look beyond his ego and extend his relationship with every living being that surrounds them. He says that a man can only develop this ‘capacity’ by ‘cultivating’ them. Ashley who viewed the landscape as a world for himself, and as nothing more than a common land to be enjoyed and used for its yield by man understands what it is to co-exist along with non-humans in the landscape. Thus Ashley who is now in a confined place begins to pay attention to the nonhuman world that has always been surrounding him. “He was intensely aware for a moment how much life there might be in any square yard of it. And he owned a thousand acres” (Malouf 18).

Further, Jim’s knowledge and his detailing about the birds amused Ashley to an extent where his perspective gets redefined about the land and its surroundings. “That was why he felt such awe when Jim so confidently offered himself as an intermediary and named them: ‘Look, the Sacred Kingfisher. From Borneo’” (Malouf 33). Ashley encouraged by Jim’s rendering of knowledge of every detail of the birds that flew across his garden kept a keen note of it. This developed a pathway for him to know the landscape and exist along with the environment. Jim and Ashley now occupy a common locale sharing all its characteristics in all its commonality. Breaking all odds and impact of an industrialized society Malouf presents Ashley in a closed space which helps him realize not just his own ecological self but his relationship with every other people in and around his environment.

There was also, on Ashley’s part, recognition that Jim too had rights here, that these acres might also belong, though in another manner, to him. ... They lay in Jim’s knowledge of every blade of grass and drop of water in the swamp, of every bird’s foot that was set down there; in his having vision of the place and the power to give that vision breath; in his having most of all, the names for things and in that way possessing them. It went beyond mere convention or the law. (Malouf 7)

Communal living which is a prime tenet of Bioregionalism is seen to happen also with a similar character named Imogen from London. Like Jim, Imogen finds her home in nature. She feels so passionate about the countryside and its course. She realizes her landscape, all at once, with so much intensity that she captures even the tiniest detail of a bird that has been visible to Jim. She romanticizes her natural environment by recording them through her photographs. This knowledge of Imogen as of Jim about the environment they live in asserts the presence of a bioregion. She is so much eco-centred rather than ego-centred that even after so much urbanization her perspective is filled with the surrounding natural environment and its community.

The ‘pastoral impulse’ in her as formulated by Leo Marx in his *The Machine in Garden* is bought out with much clearer focus as she decides to stay back in the small town leaving behind her life in the

big city. Leo Marx who is a professor of philosophy says that pastoralism is not primitivism, but an ideal between nature and industrialization. It is an escape from the industrialized land to live in close proximity with nature. Imogen thus takes a middle ground or 'middle landscape' by breaking free into the countryside rather than wilderness, so as to live in relevance with nature. Her pastoral impulse drove her to find her potential in nature and at the same time continue her passion for photography. She could work for a magazine in an urbanized land even while she is in the countryside killing the angst of machine life and thus finding her conscious filled with life in nature. This commonality between the characters was made possible through the closed locale they shared. "Jim told her of the sanctuary,... since he was certain now that there was nothing in her that would scoff at the grandness of it,...they spoke only 'of the birds'" (Malouf 29). It is this co-existence with nature that made even communal living possible for Ashley Jim and Imogen. David Malouf examines and realigns the concept of divisions and boundaries created by man. Boundary marked is human made. Culture based is overlooked in the novel by two of his characters like Jim and Ashley who in the course of the novel could understand their space better.

As bioregionalism asserts that humans are only entities in the ecological web, Ashley understands that his own self in the environment is meaningful only when it is shared with every other entity in the environment, whose existence is as unique as that of his. For instance, Ashley respects land for its own flair. He believes that it is unnecessary to follow human made borders and limit landscape into parameters. Kirkpatrick Sale states, "It is any part of the earth's surface whose natural boundaries are determined by natural characteristics rather than human dictates distinguishable from other areas by particular attributes of flora fauna, water climate, soil, and landforms, and by the human settlements and cultures those attributes have given rise to" (Kirkpatrick 55).

Thus the idea of diving lands, seas and rivers and claiming ownership over them is made subtle in the novel. Bioregionalism which states that human is only an occupant in the land and is never a master over it, is made prominent in the novel as Ashley Crowther loosens his claim over the land and lets it be, in its own realm.

...he did not impose that other, greener one upon it; it was itself. Coming back, he found he liked its mixture of powdery blues and greens, its ragged edges, its sprawl, the sense it gave of being finished, These things spoke of space, and of time in which nature might be left to go its own way and still yield up what it had to yield;...For all his cultivation, he liked what was unmade here and could, without harm, be left that way. (Malouf 12)

He believes that the land is still going to be fertile even if it is rugged or unmade and thus refuses to make any parameter or marking to divide it. He gives the land all the freedom to yield to be 'ragged' to flow and to fold. He lets nature make its own divisions and separations. This asserts Ashley's

acceptance, understanding, and respect for his immediate environment. Malouf thus characterizes human as one among the entities of the natural world, giving equal prominence for nature and man in the novel.

Malouf overshadows borders in yet another place like a battlefield. Battlefield which has proper markings is made one vast land with no difference at all as the author brings out a setting where an old man ploughs, "...stooped pressing into the earth what might now be a crop of French beans or turnips or beets..." (Malouf 110) while the soldiers have their borders marked for battle. Irrespective of the conditions of war field the old man's forceful way of ploughing nullifies the borders created by an army and implies how every land holds its own goodness. This also brings out a broad picture of how human divides the land according to his own use, as one ploughs the land for its productivity, while the other marks it for war and destruction. However, in one instance, Jim is reminded of his lifestyle back in the rural land as he notices birds visiting 'in the thick of fighting'. In spite of man's division of the land, its commodification and destruction, nature still asserts its strong presence and tranquillity as there is no division for the land. The land even when exposed to human interventions and markings would continue to exist and flourish irrespective of borders created by man. "Wednesday: larks, singing high up and tumbling not at all scared by the sound of gunfire. Skylarks. They are so tame..." (Malouf 111). Thus there is no division in the land itself, it is utterly made for human's fancies and fantasies. These instances thus describe that it is human beings who fail to coexist and thereby lack an understanding of the environment as a result of which they take charge of their environment and use them to an extent of exploiting them.

David Malouf thus portrays how humans turned from being biocentric to anthropocentric. He gives a picture of how the war is glorified and in turn how technology has taken its position to an extent of exploiting the very ground for existence which is the natural environment. Leopold rightly says "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect" (Knight 41).

Thus the politics of a place or the ethics of the environment can be acted upon only when one can view the landscapes for what it is and not for what humans want it to be. As suggested by Kirkpatrick that the environment is not just a physical land but it is the 'terrain of conscious', the only way humans can rightly claim a landscape is to know the land well enough to find their own self and the society from the land they are in.

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