



Conflicting Modes: Representation of Environmental Concerns in Brandy Nalani Mc Dougall's "Water Remembers"

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Abstract:

Since time immemorial human culture is intimately related to the environment around, and the dynamics of the relationship have a significant impact on the psychological and physiological life of mankind. The symbiotic nature of this relationship gradually got eroded with the anthropocene activities taking place on a massive scale unheeded of its future implications both on the planet and on humanity. With the dawn of the 21st century, the unhealthy and unjustifiable interventions made by humans resulted in changing the ecological stability of the environment. The complex intertwining of human and nature has undoubtedly triggered unpredictable impact on the planet including climatic variations, environmental degradation, deforestation, proliferation of plastic and e-waste and so on. Once a pristine, untouched and uninhabited space, nature has now been turned into an inhabited space featuring a series of ecological transformations such as climate change and the greenhouse effect. With the pervasive complications emanating out of the reckless activities by humans and the question of the challenges posited by them led to an emphasis on the central role of mankind in ecological and geological systems. It has to be assumed that the massive transformations affected by anthropocenic activities have occurred since the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century. However, over the last two centuries, the significant impact of the anthropocenic transformations have come to receive global attention, and the Anthropocene hypothesis gained momentum in academic scholarship and contemporary discourses. Coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Soermer in a short article "The Anthropocene", the term 'anthropocene' analyses the transformative role of the human beings on the ecosystem of the earth, and thus contributing to environmental degradation. Since then, the term has triggered multiple discourses and debates by attributing changes in biosphere to the actions of human beings. The research article titled **Conflicting Modes: Representation of Environmental Concerns in Brandy Nalani Mc Dougall's "Water Remembers"** attempts to examine Brandy Nalani Mc Dougall's significant poem "Water Remembers" which stands out as an authentic engagement with the existential implications of climate change and the subsequent environmental injustice in the tourist destination of Waikiki.

Key Words: Biosphere, Climate change, Anthropocene

Since time immemorial human culture is intimately related to the environment around, and the dynamics of the relationship have a significant impact on the psychological and physiological life of mankind. The symbiotic nature of this relationship gradually got eroded with the anthropocene activities taking place on a massive scale unheeded of its future implications both on the planet and on humanity. With the dawn of the 21st century, the unhealthy and unjustifiable interventions made by humans resulted in changing the ecological stability of the environment. The complex intertwining of human and nature has undoubtedly triggered unpredictable impact on the planet including climatic variations, environmental degradation, deforestation, proliferation of plastic and e-waste and so on. Once a pristine, untouched and uninhabited space, nature has now been turned into an inhabited space featuring a series of ecological transformations such as climate change and the greenhouse effect. With the pervasive complications emanating out of the reckless activities by humans and the question of the challenges posited by them led to an emphasis on the central role of mankind in ecological and geological systems. It has to be assumed that the massive transformations affected by anthropocenic activities have occurred since the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century. However, over the last two centuries, the significant impact of the anthropocenic transformations have come to receive global attention, and the Anthropocene hypothesis gained momentum in academic scholarship and contemporary discourses. Coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Soermer in a short article “The Anthropocene”, the term ‘anthropocene’ analyses the transformative role of the human beings on the ecosystem of the earth, and thus contributing to environmental degradation. Since then, the term has triggered multiple discourses and debates by attributing changes in biosphere to the actions of human beings. The research article titled **Conflicting Modes: Representation of Environmental Concerns in Brandy Nalani Mc Dougall’s “Water Remembers”** attempts to examine Brandy Nalani Mc Dougall’s significant poem ‘Water Remembers’ which stands out as an authentic engagement with the existential implications of climate change and the subsequent environmental injustice in the tourist destination of Waikiki.

With the changes in environment putting at stake the existence and survival of humanity, there has risen an awareness to protect and conserve what is left for the sake of posterity. Grounded in the reality that environmental degradation is a potential threat to the very existence of humanity and is with severe socio-economic and cultural implications. Therefore, imbued with sense of collective precarity, human beings have prioritised the need to examine and interrogate the ambiguous nature of our relationship with the environment around in diverse socio-geographical contexts.

It is against this backdrop that the concerns of the Indigenous people who are forced to undergo discrimination and marginalisation caused by violations of their rights to their own lands, territories and resources occupy the centre stage of critical debate and discussion in the social context of the times. From time immemorial, the Indigenous people are noted for their profound and intimate connections with their native lands and resources. Such interrelationships are strongly rooted in nature, and the ecological linkages enable them to connect themselves with the spirit of the lands. Indigenous people and their relationship with their ancestral lands can be viewed upon as assertions of their social, cultural and economic identities. But with the accelerated pace of technological advancements turning out to be detrimental to the preservation of their socio-cultural identities, it is highly important to focus on the multiple threats and obstacles which aims at violating their rights to lands and resources and denying them of justice and legal rights. With Scientific and technological advancements taking place at an alarming rate, the ecologically rich areas are now replaced with industries, and the rural sensibilities are on the decline. Conflicts and issues arising out of development and large-scale infrastructure projects fail to consider the rights and sensibilities of the Indigenous people.

Drawing from Polynesian culture and heritage, the native Hawaiians co-evolved with the environment of the Hawaiian Islands in a mutualistic and symbiotic relationship. Like all other indigenous tribes across the globe, the native Hawaiians too evolved a distinct cultural identity of their own grounded in a sense of harmony based on ancestral links between the community and the land. To them, ‘aina’ (land) was a part of their being.

Born and brought up in Kula, Maui, Brandy Nalani Mc Dougall of Chinese - Scottish descent is Associate Professor of Indigenous Studies in the American Studies Department at the University of Hawaii and the Director of the Manoa Center for the Humanities and Civic Engagement. She is the author of the poetry collections - *The salt wind* (2008) and *Birth Land* (2022). An ardent supporter of indigenous rights, she is the co-founder of Ala Press dedicated to publishing and promoting literary and creative works by Indigenous Pacific Islanders. Credited with the first extensive study of contemporary Hawaiian literature titled *finding Meaning: Kaona and Contemporary Hawaiian Literature* (2016), Nalani Mc Dougall is the Hawaii State Poet Laureate for 2023-2025.

An ecological poem, “Water Remembers” opens with a graphic description of the physical environment of Waikiki, a popular tourist destination on the south shore of the island of O’ahu in the U.S State of Hawaii as “a fertile marshland” (Mc Dougall, line). Having got attracted to the ecological richness of “ahupua’a” (2), the Indigenous people of Hawaii took resort to agrarian life as a means of biological sustenance, and started cultivating crops and planting trees such as “kalo” (taro), “uala” (sweet potato), “ulu” (bread fruit) and “niu” (Coconut) which hemmed the streams with “Mountain water gushing/from the valleys of Makiki, Manoa, Palalo, Wai’alae, and Wailupe” (Mc Dougall lines 2-4). The ecological beauty of the place before the advent of colonialism closely aligns with the relationships of the indigenous people with the earth. Aquamarine life was sustained quite efficiently at the “muliwai” (estuary). It can be seen that the Kanaka Maoli strived hard to sustain and maintain the ecological equilibrium of the place.

The spiritual intimacy and emotional ties of the Kanaka Maoli with their land is explicit in the way the indigenous people viewed their land. They regard land not merely as a physical place, but as a sacred space invested with traditional knowledge and wisdom. Stemming from the reciprocal relationship between humans and ecosystems, it can be said the aboriginal or indigenous population sans frontiers and race are the most affected, as natural resources are the only source of their sustenance the protection of which they consider it as their moral obligation. The massive movement of people across the globe paved the way for transformations in all spheres of life including the travel and tourism industry, and the rapid spread of technological advancements proved beneficial to mankind in finding out destinations never before discovered or explored. As Mc Dougall’s writing is most particularly concerned with environmental degradation which destroys indigenous activism within specific local environments. The huge extractive industries, large-scale hydroelectric projects which fail to consider the rights and interests of indigenous people have a severe socio-cultural and ecological impact on their autonomy. Tourism industry with its consumption of green spaces is a matter of grave concern to indigenous populations, as it impacts biodiversity and ecological habitats: “Environmental Pollution due to increased tourism, such as traffic congestion, littering, and noise, is an important impact that affects the quality of residents daily lives” (Chang et al, 4766)

MC Dougall is evidently concerned with the challenges posited by the destruction of local places with the onset of globalism which triggers off a series of processes manifesting itself as negative changes in the form of environmental degradation and climatic changes. In the poem, Mc Dougall shows us the contrasting images of Waikiki with its projection both as a “fertile marshland” (1) and now as “a miasma of concrete and asphalt” (12-13). The Kanaka Maoli strived hard to maintain and sustain the ecological equilibrium of the place. Nature offered them solace and consolation, and even considered it to be the foundation of Hawaiian culture and worldview. In the precolonial days, the Native Hawaiians relied much on the knowledge embodied in “aina” in order to sustain their well being. ‘Aina’ was protected with ‘ahupua’a’, the Kanaka Maoli means of water resources management characterised by vertical zonation. The water flow from mountains fall into canals, streams and man-made aqueducts, but unfortunately the waters were drained into “a canal dividing tourist from resident” (14). Following tourist incursions and urban development, Waikiki, a sacred fertility space then has now been converted into a concrete space predominated by different kinds of pollution.

Following tourist incursions and developmental activities, Waikiki, then a sacred place has now been transformed into a concrete space predominated by different kinds of pollution. Aqualife around the space has been contaminated, and the free-flow of the once life giving precious water was obstructed with pollutants in the form of “Staphylococcus” (18) which make the waters remain stagnant. The banal effects of tourism industry have undoubtedly forced mankind to reconsider our role in relation to the environment, especially when it comes to water resources. One of the fast-growing industries in the world, tourism industry has detrimental impact on the natural resources, especially water leading to its scarcity. Greater extraction exacerbates the physical impact on the environment causing air emissions, littering, release of sewage waste, spilling of oil chemicals and so on. It is estimated that most of the urban projects stem from a poor knowledge about its ecological implications as can be seen in the case of Waikiki where the increasing power of humankind has contributed to localised effects on environment. The waters drained into the polluted Ala Wai Canal, and the fields have got dismantled long time ago. The sacred stone structures or ‘heiau’ are demolished or rather replaced in order to build “multi-million dollar houses with panoramic Diamond Head and/or ocean views (lines 21-22).

The Kanaka Maoli looked upon their traditional houses as embodiments of their Socio-cultural and ecological affinity. The dichotomy between the coloniser and the colonised is noteworthy in this poem, as the Native Hawaiians were looted of their wealth and discarded as mere objects to be treaded upon by the multinational tourist companies. The natural lively beauty of the rock terraces and ‘heiau’ are effectively contrasted with the artificial lifeless beauty of human creations. The poet continues with her lament on the loss of the ecological beauty of the place when she points out the gradual degradation of hotels which “fester like pustules” (24). The development of tourism in such destinations created negative impact on the environment as it spread like an infectious disease in an uncontrolled manner, and even to the extent of destroying the available natural resources. Mc Dougall notes how the tourism industry has influenced the physical geography and ecological fabric contributing to progressive changes in the local environment. As Mc Dougall puts it:

the fields and have long been dismantled,
their rock terraces and heiau looted
to build the walls of multi-million dollar
houses with panoramic Diamond Head
and/or ocean views (Mc Daugall, lines 21 - 22).

The anthropocentric exploitative tendencies have contributed to pollution of water, one of the critical and indispensable natural resources on an unprecedented scale. The sense of sanctity once associated with water has now yielded place to its qualitative and quantitative contamination. Till then, Waikiki fed the people, but it is no longer a source of nourishment. On the contrary, the land value of Waikiki has increased, and it has been converted into a place where only “money can be grown” (32). Introduced and promoted by human beings themselves, tourism industry in Waikiki has only served to hamper the quality of its living space, thus providing no scope for the ecological nourishment of organisms or humans themselves. The natural beauty of the place is commercialised beyond control, and water has turned out to be “unpotable, polluted” (32) and significantly, the greed of the people outweighed their considerations towards the nature. The warmth which once characterised the symbiotic relationship that existed between man and other natural organisms has now paved the way for a lacklustre relationship devoid of feelings towards ‘aina’ and water:

... No one
is fed plants and fish from this aina now
its land value has grown so that nothing
but money can be grown - its waters
un potable, polluted (Mc Daugall, lines 29 - 32)

To Mc Dougall, a world without climate changes has become impossible and so she dwells on its harsh impact on the physical geography of Waikiki. Impact of climate changes are perceived in the form of changing patterns of water availability and of precipitation increasing the likelihood of droughts and floods. In Waikiki heavy rainfalls destroy the place by creating flood, and the sewage system is in such a bad condition that it spews waste into the streets causing environmental hazards. The “king tides” (37) from the ocean roll in destroying sandbags and barricades, and ultimately eroding the resorts. From a geomorphological perspective, the major physical impacts of rise in sea-level undoubtedly leads to coastal erosion with a landward migration of the coastline and subsequent beach erosion. Under growing pressures to expand and develop tourism industry, huge buildings are constructed on the beaches in expectation of high revenues, but the clear trends of continued anthropogenic modification of coastlines and beaches poses a challenge to environmental Scientists in the effective management and protection of coastal resources. Mc Dougall’s sensitive attachment to her ‘aina’ is evident in this poem as she points out the dangers associated with coastal erosion ruining tourism industry in Hawaii. Changes that take place in the name of tourism are not beneficial to the local residents of Hawaii, and Mc Dougall therefore prevails upon the need towards reconsidering the need to adopt a sustainable attitude and ecologically - friendly approach towards environment which can in turn be rendered possible only by protecting and preserving the native environmental practices in Hawaii:

This is not the end of civilization, but
a return to one. Only the water insisting
on what it should always have, spreading
its liniment over infected wounds. Only
the water rising above us, reteaching us
wealth and remembering its name (Mc Dougall, lines 40 - 45)

Instead of an exploitative relationship with nature, human beings should explore and enrich the ecological wealth of the region, and should try to derive soothing sensation out of the healing touch of nature. Due to uncontrolled human interventions, the physical environment of Waikiki has got altered beyond imagination, and has become an infectious space inflicted with wounds which mars the beauty of the landscape. Mc Dougall feels that tourism industry as a major source of revenue generation is very often at the cost of the environment and that the real revenue lies in the ecological heritage of Waikiki, especially its waters. “Water Remembers” thus becomes an authentic engagement with the existential implications of climate change engendered by anthropogenic interventions.

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