

NEGOTIATING HISTORY IN ROBERT MERRITT'S THE CAKE MAN

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التفاوض التاريخي في (رجل الكعكة) لروبرت ميريت

الباحثة
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Abstract:-

History is a source of trauma for the Aboriginal writers and in particular dramatists. Like the most of Aboriginal playwright, Robert Merritt aims to negotiate Aboriginal history on the stage. In *The Cake Man*, Merritt seeks to illustrate the impact of the colonialist invasion and forcible encroachment over an Aboriginal family. Thus, this article examines Merritt's negation of history by focusing on a poor Aboriginal family. The paper argues that this negation might lead to loss and fragmentation on familial and communal levels. This paper approaches such a trend by studying how the playwright manipulates the stage to reflect political issues that are related to the traumatic history of the Aboriginal in Australia.

Keywords: History, trauma, Robert Merritt, Postcolonialism.

المخلص:-

التاريخ مصدر الصدمة للأدباء من السكان الاصليين وبالخصوص المؤلفين المسرحيين. وكغيره من معظم مؤلفي الروايات المسرحية من السكان الاصليين، يهدف الكاتب المسرحي روبرت ميرت للتفاوض على تاريخ السكان الاصليين من على خشبة المسرح. وفي مسرحية (رجل الكعك) يسعى ميرت ان يبين تأثير الغزو الاستعماري والتجاوز العدواني على احدى الأسر من السكان الاصليين. وهكذا، فإن هذه المقالة تنفحص تفاوض ميرت للتاريخ على اسرة فقيرة من السكان الاصليين. إن هذه الورقة تجادل في أن هذا التفاوض ينبغي أن يؤدي إلى خسارة و تفرق على المستويين الاسري والمجتمعي. تقترب هذه الورقة من هكذا اتجاه من دراسة انه كيف أن كاتب المسرحية يسخر المسرح ليعكس القضايا السياسية المتعلقة بتاريخ الصدمة للسكان الاصليين في استراليا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التاريخ، الصدمة، روبرت ميرت، ما بعد الاستعمار.

1. INTRODUCTION

History, according to Gardiner, “ is an unending dialogue between the present and the past ” in which both negotiate the events (1988,p. 1). The white Australian historical texts view that Aborigines in negative way and they differ little from brutes and the Christian missionaries in the colonial Australia spread careful canards about the evil dispositions of Aborigines. Attributes about the natives such as laziness, fickleness, double-dealing, deceit and revenge are often willfully exaggerated and carefully concocted. The biased view of the colonial discourses and paradigms marginalize the natives and make them self-suspect. The brutal massacre of the natives, the confiscation of land and sacred sites, the exploitation of Aboriginal labor, the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by white men, the use of neck chains and the high rate of imprisonment have never been recorded in white Australian history. Thus , for Aborigines , the reconstructing of history is urgent necessity to reveal the real history as it really happened. As Hodge (1985) holds history is more important and more inseparable for Aborigines than is the case for Whites. For the Whites, history is in safe hands while Aboriginal people have been excluded from it (p.101.)

Alongside, literature appears as an incredible tool to rewrite and interpret history through its textuality. Refusing to fit automatically into any Western intellectual discourse, Aboriginal literature emerges as a decolorized or decolonizing literature in its spirit, content, purpose and functions. This literature functions not only as literature, but also as a historical, social, political and economic discourse, and it also bends the English language inevitably. It springs from such depths of experience that without an introduction to history and culture it becomes impossible to interpret. Thus , the Aboriginal writer, who is intent on constructing a counter history from an Aboriginal perspective, encounters a formidable corpus of white historical discourses that portray them as Other and distort and dismiss the roles of the them in the history of Australia. In this regard, it is significant to note the views of White (2004) about the mutual relationship between history and literature :

literature became history's other in a double sense: it pretended to have discovered a dimension of reality that historians would never

recognize and it developed techniques of writing that undermined the authority of history's favored realistic or plain style of writing. (p.25)

Aboriginal writers negotiate the validity of the official version of history and they are aware that in order to develop a stable, social, and political structure a new nation like Australia needs to know its roots. This naturally presupposes a strategic adaptation by Aboriginal writers to redefine the act of brutal colonization and forcible evacuation in Australia. In general , the Aboriginal literature is marked by a continuous struggle to resolve the tension between the popular white beliefs of land acquisition and the mythologizing of it by Aborigines. Consequently , they are faced with the need to salvage their past history from distortions and denigrations. Their dialogue with those colonialist versions of history therefore assumes a subversive character.

In this sense , the purpose of Aboriginal writers is not to denigrate, blame or promote guilt but to recognize the injustices of the past and look for positive solutions for the fixture. As Rath points out in the his (2015) article 'On New Voices in Literature', Aboriginal drama survives "not because it expresses what was never expressed before but because the author, in his whole being, experiences the theme of the work intensely and authentically. Such an experience and not the striving for newness creates great lasting literature" (p.15). By voicing their concerns about a historical silence, Aboriginal writers help to perceive the plight of the Australian Aboriginal people without directing their rancor at the present generation of White Australians and by engaging in a constant dialogue with history.

It is the ignored history of the Aboriginal Australians that provide a remarkable backdrop to the plays written by contemporary aboriginal playwrights. The Settlers ironically claim that whatever they do is for the betterment of the indigenous people. Eurocentric history paradoxically teaches that the pioneers explored, discovered and settled without any bloodshed. On the other hand, Aboriginal history constructs a different version by pointing out that the indigenous people were enjoying a peaceful and contented life until the white invaders disenfranchised them, exploited their land and women and stole their children. Consequently, there is an apparent contradiction between the histories of the victors and the vanquished.

Aboriginal literature sticks to the view that White Australians in a conspiracy of silence have buried the massacres and the shameless treatment of the indigenous people. They accuse the white historians of suppressing or falsifying most of the events and people who have been important to the Natives. Like any other genre of Australian Aboriginal literature, drama grew out of a need to redefine Aboriginal identity in the 1960s with the civil rights movement on the upsurge. Contemporary Aboriginal dramatists ,therefore , interrogate both white history and the oral tradition of Aborigines and seek the truth about the indigenous people. The main aim of majority of the indigenous Australian playwrights is to reflect upon Australia's violent history by giving indigenous people a say as well as to celebrate aboriginal survival, pride and heritage . Enthused by the socio-cultural and political obligations to negotiate the dominant ideology of the condescending white history, many of them rediscover their native cultural treatise and make enormous use of their indigenous tradition to reclaim their pre-colonial past.

As victims of British colonialism, Aboriginal playwrights have always mirrored the historical religious and territorial subjugation of their land in their writings, especially in their dramatic literature because of its high popularity and social impact. Aboriginal stage has always been a significant place to put Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people next to each other. Therefore, the important functions of Aboriginal performances has been “to break the silence that surrounded their history and survival” (Casey, 2013, p. 156). To publicize the centuries-long imperial injustice befallen on them, they have counted on the socio-political power of the stage. They believe the theater is a powerful site to set the stage for expressing their true history.

2. ROBERT MERRITT AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF ABORIGINAL HISTORY

Among these playwrights who sought to represent true history of Aboriginals is Robert Merritt. Like Jack Davis , Merritt takes Aboriginal history as a main source for his writing. His plays , as the most of Aboriginal plays, register a note of protest against white Australia's attempts to mystify the Aboriginal past . Merritt portrays the contemporary search for Aboriginal identity, the loss of traditional authority structures and the figurative emasculation of Aboriginal people which has taken place. As Enoch notes “ Indigenous plays

are a way of weaving our perspective into the public story-telling of this nation. So much of the[background] general public knows about indigenous Australia comes from a white perspective, filtered through the white-owned media” (2007, p. x).

Merritt was born in Cowra in 1936 at Erambie Mission, near Cowra of New South Wales . He is one of nine children of an Aboriginal laborer. He attended Cowra primary and high schools, where he was an outstanding student, but was later unable to find any work other than seasonal manual labor. He has since spent long periods in prison. The Cake Man is the first play by an Aboriginal playwright to be performed in Australia. It written by Robert Merritt and directed by Bob Maza, had its premiere at the Black Theatre on 9 January 1975. Later, the play performed by the Australian Aboriginal Theatre Company at the World Theatre Festival in Colorado in 1982 (Wilde et al. 1985,p.136,419). It was a modern play set in an era of assimilation policies, rural unemployment, and widespread migration of Aboriginal people to the city in search of better opportunities. The locale of Merritt's “Cake” is a medium sized country town in the Central Western district of New South Wales. Merritt's experiences as a Wiradjuri man growing up on the Erambie mission near Cowra inspired the script. Merritt was serving a sentence in Bathurst prison when the play was produced, and he received writing assistance from playwright Jim McNeil, who was also serving a sentence at the time. The play is an attempt to rediscover the native Australian consciousness and to release the native soul from the cultural identity forged with its remarkable socio- religious observations. The Cake man is viewed as a new reading to history in which the real facts had been distorted (Brisbane , 1977,p. 66).

The play's title has its origin in the story told by Ruby, the Aboriginal mother on the mission at Cowra to her son Pumpkinhead, about the mythical half-blind cake man who will one day be able to see little black boys as clearly as he seems to see little white boys and will give the black boys their overdue rewards. Symbolically, “Cake Man” is a character who is sent with gifts of love by Jesus for Aboriginal children, but has been blinded by a villain so that he can only see white children on his wanderings in the bush. The white man's salving of his conscience for Aboriginal mistreatment is suggested by the play's white character, the Civilian, who offers

cakes and goodies to the poverty-stricken black family. The more important themes of the play lie in the presentation of the poor conditions suffered by mission Aborigines, the warm affection existing within the Aboriginal family, and the male Aborigines' loss of self-respect and dignity (Wilde et al. 1985,p.136). The play also portrays the effects of colonization as well as the contemporary search for Aboriginal identity.

The Cake Man does not use Aboriginal language in an attempt to make the play accessible to non-Aborigines spectators. Merritt has skillfully appropriated Western theatre techniques in the play. Such accessibility seems to be intentional as Merritt hopes to dramatize the imperial history from an Aboriginal viewpoint to make his non-Aboriginal audience sympathize with native Australians. To discuss the history of Aboriginal social and political calamity, Merritt's focal point in The Cake Man is Christianity. According to Adam Shoemaker (2004), Merritt believes that "the Church has buttressed the efforts of government to remove all the authority of Aboriginal men" (p. 135) and hence Merritt regards Christianity as "the most destructive force that has ever hit the Aboriginal people [. . .]You can't even say it's Christian charity; it's a sick interpretation of a sad political philosophy", The Cake Man uncovers the historical, ideological workings of Christianity in furthering imperial domination (2004, p. 135).

On many levels, the play might be viewed as an absurd examination of white colonialism from the standpoint of a black person. The plot revolves around the difficulties of life on a missionary-run reserve. It dramatizes how Christianity was imposed on Aboriginal civilization at the start of European contact, resulting in a near loss of tradition, language, and culture. A native family is shown living happily in nature in the play's opening scene. Their joy is suddenly cut short by the arrival of a priest, a soldier, and a civilian who attempts to convert them to Christianity, the dominant colonial ideology. Following the native family's resistance to the priest's and civilian's wheedling comments, the soldier kills the native man and kidnaps his wife and son. When everything is gone, the native man opens his eyes and stands up, introducing himself as an anticolonial person in a symbolic scene (Javidshad and Hadaegh,2020,p. 269).

In the second act, the native man is known as Sweet William. He lives on the missions with his wife Ruby and their eleven year-old child

Pumpkinhead. Ruby is now a Christian subject, although William continues to oppose the new religion. He is now unemployed and spends his days drinking. He has lost respect as a man and father in the family as a result of his poverty. Ruby seeks solace in the Bible and remains a sympathetic wife and caring mother. . The Cake Man is a more subtle and ambiguous drama. It's a play built on better illusions. While Ruby's religious devotion gives her the strength to keep her family together in the face of her husband's despondency and near-alcoholism - the ironically named Sweet William - it also obligates her to accept God's will without question. John Although Newfong holds that : " Sweet Williams at least believes in his own potential " , and Ruby by dint of her " Christian beliefs , undermines his beliefs in himself because she doesn't dare . believe in herself " (Shoemaker 2004 : 242) .

Pumpkinhead helps where he can, even by stealing from white colonialists. Pumpkinhead asks his mother to tell him the story of the Cake Man, a mythical character who gives cakes to children to give them hope when the shadow of melancholy hangs over them. Although the son enjoys the narrative, he is doubtful about the Cake Man's existence. Pumpkinhead is arrested after stealing from a civilian house. The civilian learns about the child's poor living conditions by taking him to his parents' house. He finally forgives the son by sending a cake to him, resulting in the child's conviction in the existence of the Cake Man. In the end of the story, William is seen in Sydney to find a job. While standing near a pub, he is taken away by the police mistakenly for some troublesome Aborigines to an unknown destiny.

3. A COLONIALIST OR A PRIEST: MERRITT'S THE CAKE MAN AND THE NEGOTIATION OF MISSIONARY PURPOSES

The Cake Man is both straightforward and complex play . It is about the small details of life in a changing world. The play demonstrates a shift from a pre-invasion idyll to the hard scrabble of modern life on a mission in western New South Wales . In Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature (2004), Adam Shoemaker refers to The Cake Man as "an historical play which makes pointed comments about black/white interracial history in Australia" (p. 135). In this play, Merritt is questioning the sincerity of missionary act and its linkage to colonialist invasion. Historically , the missionary act, like

the colonizers, often arrive with the sense of justification that his presence would foster the growth and development of otherwise primitive or pagan culture. Thus , the priests who arrived on the same boat as the rest of the colonizers seek to establish himself and his religion as a source of moral authority and guidance in spite of being part of an invading the foreign entity.

In such realization, the anti-missionary and refusing of engaging in forced conversion with strangers represents a central theme in the play. Traumatized by the sudden appearance of new comers, Sweet William, the Aboriginal father declaims bitterly in the prologue of the play his attitude against Christianity: “Forget all this shit about giving me back my culture... What I want, what I’m here for is... it’s something else again” (p.1) . Unlike Jack Davis, Merritt does not depend on using the Aboriginal oral tradition instead he relies on caricatures. They are the symbolic stereotyping of the Priest, Soldier Civilian, the Aboriginal Man, Woman and Child. The opening scene of the play “relies upon caricature like the indigenous political pieces of the early 1970’s or Bill Onus’ indigenous revues of the late 1940’s with stereotyping of the Priest, Soldier, Civilian and the Aboriginal Man, Woman, and Child” (Eckersley, 2012,p.76). The dramatic representation of these caricatures is highly effective as they satirize “the power of God and Gun” (Eckersley, 2012,p.76) .

Drawing from Said’s (1978) Orientalism, the moral authority assumed by the church, the mission, and the priest demonstrates the dominance of knowledge and power of West over East and North over South. The priests come with authority and by virtue of their status as men of God in the church of the occupying West, they find themselves with what Said refers to as “positional superiority” (p.7). It is a dominance that places the West and its institutions, which can easily be considered to include the mission, in a position to control discourse and knowledge in the manner described by Said in Orientalism as:

Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient [in the same way with the Aboriginal] dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling

over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.(p.3)

Homi Bahaba in *The Location of Culture* emphasizes the “ambivalences” nature of the relation of colonizer/colonized with particular attention to the demands of the “evangelical colonialism” to be heard and accepted (1994 , p.48). The relation is not one of mutual respect, but rather one in which the foreign ideas are imposed. Thus, the words of the missionary may have little weight after passing to the ears of the colonized. They present a hierarchy of power that would seem contrary to their purported message of love and would also seem to be a major impediment to their being accepted as messengers of a religion of service and grace. In addition to seeing the priest as a man of power whom they should fear, much of the population sees the priest as having a purely selfish motivation for his efforts in Australia . Rather than being seen as one who has come to help those in need, he is perceived by many as seeking to exploit the colonial situation for his own material benefit as well as for that of his church.

With particular consideration to a dubious connection with colonialism, the presumed position of the priest as one of spiritual and, consequently, moral authority is one filled with contradiction and ambiguity, especially within the mission's efforts to claim a position of authority within their different communities or regions. As he would in any parish or missionary setting, the priest seeks to encourage and establish a particular moral order. His position as religious leader supposes a moral authority on his part, yet such presumed moral authority is questionable on at least two fronts: the manner in which it at times conflicts with mores of the native culture and religious practice and the aforementioned relation of the mission to the colonial undertaking. As Hart asserts that “Religion and culture are similar in that both provide “systems of authority” and “canons of order” that coerce and seduce a large following. They are charismatic; they produce moments of collective effervescence, divine madness” (p.10).

The religious discourse has always been a crucial target in Aboriginal postcolonial writing. For Merritt, Christianity did not deliver them with peace as declared. *The Cake Man* attempts to establish a ground for this clash of culture, religion and imperialism in a

colonial setting. In such a setting, a sense of fear is created on the stage. A native family is forced to choose between two unavoidable options: death or suppression to colonial rules under the threat of the guns. Key tools in imperialist efforts to persuade the members of this family to change their moral code include this as well as invisible, intangible heavenly rewards. According to Wheeler "the imposition of a foreign religious system on Indigenous people is meant to destabilize their cultural bonds and shake the trust in their identity and culture" (p.131). Accordingly, this scene has put the family in a critical situation that is aptly described by Ashcroft et al. a "colonial discourse constructs a particular kind of subject with which the subject itself can and often does concur because of its powerlessness" (2007, p. 225).

Since *The Cake Man* criticizes this kind of a forced conversion, ideological discourse is actively present from the very beginning of the play. By describing the confrontational moment between the Aboriginal family and new comers, Merritt depicts how serenity governs the three Aboriginal characters in their surrounding where "Earth, water, sky: nature at ease." and "All three embrace. They sit contentedly together, requiring no more" (p.5). By the entrance of colonial agents, this serenity is shattered where: "Staring in alarm" (p.5). The Aboriginal family sees a priest, a soldier, and a civilian approaching them. The connection between the two is one of negotiation and historical transaction:

PRIEST: Greetings! And God's blessing. I bring you good news! Here it is my child, [offering the Bible] for you and little family. And this also I bring to you [wagging the cross] and to your people. The gift of love. The promise of salvation. (p.6)

The priest's utterances are full of pleasant words with positive implications and are all designed to win the subject's agreement in order to wield power. As Althusser notices that by using mild words, authorial powers utilize their attempts to evade the truth and the ideological discourses reinforce "the imaginary relation to the real conditions of existence" (1971, p. 153).

The Aboriginal man reacts by covering his family and keeping quiet. The priest and his followers are forced to modify their methods of communication in order to overcome the opposition. They observe

that the Aboriginal family has been put through a traumatic experience and fear. While the colonial agents are frustrated by the man's lack of knowledge, the man and the colonial agents engage in a second round of negotiation:

CIVILIAN: Here, I'll reach them with my pretties .He steps forward, reaching in his bag to bring forth bright beads, ribbons, and so on. He offers them in a coaxing way to the MAN, WOMAN, and BOY. They step back from his pretties” (p.7).

After the priest, the civilian is the second party involved in colonial negotiations. In a similar vein to the priest, the civilian tries to attract the Aboriginal family with his good looks and charisma by using a "coaxing way" of presentation. However, the colonial negotiation is unsuccessful since the family persists in resisting. The fact that the colonial agents are forced to resort to the use of force as their final available choice causes the priest to voice his disappointment in the situation as shown in this episode:

PRIEST: Alas! I have failed.

CIVILIAN: Don't blame yourself, now.

SOLDIER: Aren't the two of us here, Father, both witnesses to your patience?

PRIEST: Bless you, bless you both (p.7)

In these exchanges, the theological justification of the colonial agents is clear. It is evident how the priest resorts to religious terminology and a unidirectional approach when the debate breaks down. However , as they failed, the colonizer's final solution is to shoot and to kill the Man (P.6). The colonial negotiation then resumes its position of prominence when the soldier attempts to forcibly take the Aboriginal man's family:

SOLDIER: Leave it to me, Father.

PRIEST: No, let me try again. Come? Will you not come now out of darkness into the light? No? (p.9)

When the priest suddenly shifts his pleasant speech into a negative tone and says, "Oh, you poor savage devils, you don't understand, do you?" the dramatic situation of this moment is ratcheted up to a higher level (p.9). After numerous arguments of

violence and talks between the three colonial agents, the indigenous family finally agrees to accompany them. When the woman accepts the Bible presented by the priest, the following occurs: PRIEST: There, take it and keep it always. Keep it, and from it learn wisdom, and faith, and love. [Together with the SOLDIER, he starts to shepherd the WOMAN and the BOY off the stage.] Come [...] don't be frightened. Put your trust in us. we're going to make you our own (p.11).

The colonizer's claim that "we're going to make you our own" does not come true for the Aboriginal man who is abandoned onstage. "the Man" then "opens his eyes and gets groggily on his feet" as they leave (p.12). This is a metaphor for Merritt's anti-colonial work and the continued existence of the Aboriginal people and their culture. To show how the colonial system has ignored Aboriginal culture and religion, Merritt reinterprets past events from the point of view of the colonized. The playwright, in his rereading, reveals how religious mission, or more specifically imperialist ideology, builds the colonial path in the public arena, wiping out native rituals and ideals.

CONCLUSION

Aboriginal writers negotiate the validity of the official version of history and they are aware that in order to develop a stable, social, and political structure a new nation like Australia needs to know its roots. This naturally presupposes a strategic adaptation by Aboriginal writers to redefine the act of brutal colonization and forcible evacuation in Australia. Thus, *The Cake Man* by Robert Merritt is viewed as a ridiculous examination of white colonialism from a black perspective. It serves as an example of the difficulties of living on a missionary-run reservation; how Christianity was imposed on Aboriginal society at the outset of European contact, resulting in virtually total loss and fragmentation within familial and social space.

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