
Ecology in Paul Muldoon's Postcolonial Poetry

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Abstract :

This paper considers the place of ecology and environmentalist thought in Paul Muldoon's postcolonial poetry. Employing the principles of postcolonial ecocriticism, the study throws light upon Muldoon's poetical works where the Irish-American poet tries to preserve his native agricultural identity and tradition in face of the global Anglo-American culture. In most of his verse volumes, Muldoon mentions agrarian and green aspects as well as native rustic jargon, which helps enliven and strengthen his native Irish roots, and shield the Gaelic region's distinct cultural and linguistic heritage. The poet's portrayal of local landscape phenomena entails intellectual and emotional intimacy. He is personally attached to Irish ecological spots, and they are venues in which he finds a considerably remarkable meaning ,i.e., solid ground on which the anti-conquest's cultural-lingual resistance stands. The private (and public) worth of this georgic atmosphere helps foster both the poet's and his natives' stance against a plotted process of naturalization. Muldoon's poems, too, show how postcolonial corporeal and cultural effect endeavours to boom throughout human and environmental worlds.

Key Words :

Ecology, Paul Muldoon, national identity, Anglo-American culture, postcolonial ecocriticism



1 – Introduction :

The practice of looking at the “green world,” represented by the village or the forest(the rural community) as compared to the urban community (the city), has started earlier, even before the emergence of postmodernist studies, upon justifying the change of setting in Shakespeare’s comedies particularly As You Like It; the role played by environmentalist thought in literary works has been given its first spur during the 1960s and the 1970s (Rigby 172). Ecological studies have been linked to other religious, historical, philosophical and sociological disciplines. The novel expedition of scholar-like enterprise in the spheres of ecological studies, postcolonial ecocriticism, ecotheology and ecofeminism, plainly manifests that environmentalist awareness is extensively being considered in literary and scholastic discourse (Branch 92). Literary investigation has recently been absorbed by ecological thinking, where it diversely emerges under the title of green writing, ecological literature, nature/culture critique, spatial studies, and several other branches which can be assembled under the banner of ecocriticism (Branch 92-3).

The term “green postcolonialism”(Huggan and Tiffin,2007), which has developed into “postcolonial ecocriticism” (Cilano and DeLoughrey,2007) has been used to build bridges between postcolonial theory and ecological studies, to fill in “ the unproblematized division between people (on the postcolonial side) and nature (on the ecocritical



one)”(Cilano and DeLoughrey 75). In their book, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2015), Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin throw light on the birth and dimensions of postcolonial ecocriticism, thus:

Postcolonial studies have come to understand environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination ... not only where other people often regarded as part of nature – and thus treated instrumentally as animals – but also they were forced or co-opted over time into western views of the environment(6).

Postcolonial ecocriticism directs “attention to both global imperial context and the parts of the world often elided” by Western ecocriticism’s stress on mostly Anglo-American cultural output (Caminero-Santagmelo & Myers 6). Postcolonial criticism combats the poscolonial critics’ lack of interests in ecology. The colonizer often looks at the environment as provider of more than just the essential requirements for man’s welfare (Fanon 38). To the colonized, the earth is seen not just as a source of food, but also as a cause of being worthy of honour and respect(Fanon 38). The ecological facets of colonialism can be seen in “phenomena like the extraction of natural resources, the forced changing in human and animal settlement patterns and the dissolution of traditional means of arranging and using land” (Nelson 141-2). The postcolonial form of ecocriticism has arisen from the conventional methods of ecocriticist appreciation; it is established in the notion that



colonized places suffer topographical and environmental change, and that the critic attempts to explore and problematize these spaces (Vital 87).

Paul Muldoon (1951 -) has reckoned that each natural object, irrespective of whether it is minute or unattractive, illustrates a paramount origin of aesthetic solicitude. His subtle observation of the single constituents of scenery has set the specific as a novel cosmopolitan system. Not only has he disinterestedly explored the green sphere from a non-remote tower- i.e., a viewer of nature, but also has neither been empirically detached from ecology, nor mentally extricated from, or indifferent to, the agrarian life.

Paul Muldoon (1951 -) was born in an agricultural area in the Northern- Irish countryside. His peasantry childhood is frequently evident in his poems, and his being a Roman Catholic who lived in the Protestant North Ireland has inspired most of his ecological poems. He said of his village, Moy:

" It's a beautiful part of the world. It's still the place that's burned into the retina, and although I haven't been back there since I left for university 30 years ago, it's the place I consider to be my home ... a peasant society that really had not changed for a long time. I remember vividly a neighbor plowing with horses, people planting turnips ... there were tramps, gentlemen of the road ... I used to go out there on a cold winter morning and the pigs



were being fed ... there were always various animals lurking around "(Newey,2001).

In most of his poems, Muldoon depends on obscure allusions and natural symbols, which makes his work reputedly difficult to grasp. There are often abstruse allusions, the casual, even sarcastic tone, and the endless wordplay. In Muldoon's work, different images are gathered in a way that point to various directions; "some of his poems read as ... cut-and-paste method" (Newey, 2001). He uses natural items to refer to local politics as well as to discuss philosophical issues; in this he is very much like Robert Frost and the metaphysical poets.

2 - Objective, Problem, and Methodology of the Study

This paper tries to establish links between the ecocritical concern with human-environment bond, and the postcolonialist interest in matters such as identity, and colonized-colonizer lingual-cultural interaction. Through a close reading of selected Paul Muldoon's poems, the study attempts to address questions about postcolonial eco-consciousness, the postcolonial impact upon rustic life and language, and georgic environmentalism as a kind of postcolonial cultural resistance.

Based upon an ecocritical-postcolonial approach, this paper focuses on Muldoon's imaginative representation of his early agricultural



background, and how this background has responded to postcolonial delineations. The peasant environment is thus considered as both object-maintained and subject-maintainer. The method of approaching the issue discussed in the proposed study would be mainly analytical and ontological. Through a qualitative, textual examination of selected poetry of Paul Muldoon, the study pinpoints the poet's way to employ natural elements taken from the traditional Irish countryside as a shield against Anglo-American cultural globalism. The scrutiny is chiefly nestled on a postcolonial-ecocritical reading of selected poems from Paul Muldoon's Meeting the British, New Weather, The Annals of Chile, Qoof, Moy Sand and Gravel, Hay, and Madoc: A Mystery. Yet, reference to other works would be possible.

4 - Discussion

Muldoon often explores the issue of the lost Irish identity, and tries to go back to his georgic roots in order to revoke this bygone experience and retain the Irish green past. Most of his ecological works illustrate the notion that the Irish people's loss of trust in their countryside being would encumber and endeavor to interface with the Other. Muldoon's poems show a growingly self-denotative inclination which ensues from the poet's alternate attempts to attain self-consciousness through probing for his vegetarian quintessence.



In "Gathering Mushrooms"(Qoof), Paul Muldoon renders the 1960s' conflict in North Ireland in symbolic description mixed with autobiographical hints. The death of his parents stands for the suppression by the Protestants and the British of the Catholic nationalist who call for complete independence from British hegemony:

While the Monarch butterflies passed over

In their milk-weed hunger: 'A wing-beat, some reckon,

May trigger off the mother and father

.....

As he knelt by the grave of his mother and father

He could barely tell one from the other

The speaker is confused by the sectarian dispute; the British rule of Ireland has changed the origin of everything: the taste of dill is mistaken for that of tarragon, the location of Maine for that of Oregon. He feels that he should adhere to old nationalist principles: "the tang of her little pickled gherkin". The noise made by the bloody British air raids reckons the dead parents, shakes the Catholics' resolution. The poet then proceeds to speak symbolically about the Irish participation in World War II; the Irish aided the Monarch(Britain) and Milkweed(America) against the samovar(Russia). In



the late 1980s the Irish get their self-rule, but are affected by the Anglo-American culture, to the extent that "He'd mistaken his mother's name, 'Regan', for 'Anger'".

In "Hedgehog"(New Weather), Muldoon employs such a secret animal to stand for the Irish Catholics who preferred to gain their independence from the Anglo-Irish Protestants, and live in isolation in north Ireland:

.....The hedgehog

Shares its secret with no one

We say, Hedgehog, come out

Of yourself and we will love you.

.....

We forget that never again

Will a god trust in the world.

According to the 1800's Act of Union, the Protestants committed themselves to "no harm" to the Catholics. But the Irish nationalists refused to naturalize in Britain. Likewise, the hedgehog "gives nothing/ away, keeping itself to itself ". Like the hedgehog, the Catholic nationalists distrusted the



Protestant Unionists, and believed that they would remain economically and politically second-class citizens without self-rule. Then, "no wonder what a hedgehog/ has to hide, why it so distrusts".

In "Pineapples and Pomegranates" (Moy Sand and Gravel), Muldoon uses the pineapple as a symbol of the effect of British invasion on the Irish. The fruit turns from being a symbol of generosity (and an acceptance of the other) to being a symbol of the bombs and arms used by the Unionists and the Nationalists(a rejection of the Other):

Of its being a world-wide symbol of munificence

Munificence – right? Not munitions, if you understand

Where I'm coming from.

.....

I'm talking about pineapples- right? Not pomegranate

When he was a young boy, the speaker underwent the bitter experience of war, with all the bombs and arms spread in the agrarian northern region. He loses his sense of enjoying the taste of the pineapple. Its stiff leaves become too hard. The invasion soldiers are paid for throwing the grenades over the innocent natives. Unlike Sarah Maguire's representation of the fruit



in her “The Pomegranates of Kandahar”, Muldoon spares speaking about the pomegranates, the wide destructions caused by more developed weapons.

In "Tell"(Madoc: A Mystery), Muldoon speaks symbolically about the Irish's participation in the World War I. They fought in the British army(and its allies) against the central powers. The poet sees the Irish as the apples peeled and lose their essence:

He opens the door of the peeling-shed

Just as one of the apple-peelers

.....

Of red-cheeked men who pare and core

The red-cheeked apples

For a few spare shillings ...

The wind of war hits the Irish land; the 'Crow' and the 'Comanche tepees' are symbols of British and American troops. During the 'bloodshed' (war) the Irish fight against people who are not their enemies; they replace their red-cheeked' faces, and with 'peeled' personalities they help their colonizers who promised to grant them home rule. By the end of the war, all the victorious allies put down their arms, except the Irish; the speaker's father



is still ready for shooting, carries his gun and closes "one eye as if taking aim/ or holding back a tear". He has not yet gained his independence, so he is always at war.

In "Mules" (Mules), he uses this animal as a symbol of an unlikely union of the Irish and the British; he tries "to explore these lives that couldn't quite reproduce themselves, and that were sterile in themselves [...] lives caught between heaven and earth" (Haffenden 131):

Here feet of clay gave the lie

To the star burned in our mare's brow.

Would Parson's jackass not rest more assured

That cross wrenched from his shoulder?

While the initial line would seem to refer to the mules of the title, it could also apply to mare and jackass in the lines that follow. The description of the mare consists of two symbols denoting earth("feet of clay") and heaven ("star"), and the description of the jackass counters his profane earthliness with intimations of Christian supernaturalism (the cross on his shoulders). Each creature bears at least the possibility of a mixed heritage itself, even if that possibility is couched in the idioms, symbols, and questions of language. The mule displays a physical superposition of states, and lacks the ability to



reproduce, therefore, making it easier to recognize it as a challenge to the system of possibilities that comprises the world, but uncertainly about the state or nature of an organism is not restricted to such hybrids.

In "Cows"(The Annals of Chile) , Muldoon places the poem's speaker with a group of comparisons in the Irish countryside, where they have been run over by a truck. That truck becomes a symbol of uncertainty, as the sight of what "must be the same truck" farther down the road leads to suspicions about its contents, and about the import of the "one tail-light" that they see "flash and flare,/ then flicker-fade." While the metaphors bear and produce conjectures about the lorry, the narrator is distracted by a series of associated thoughts about cows and language, that begins with a presentation of the etymology of "boreen". He notes its Gaelic source and its literal translation as "little cow across," but also emphasizes its ability to overcome the perspective control of the almighty dictionary: "boreen" has entered English "through the air"/ despite the protestations of the O.E.D." Air has a certain power, as it carries cows and transcends borders.

Cow-coterie, by the way, whey-faced, with Spode

Hooves and horns: nor are they the metaphysicattle of Japan

That have merely to anticipate

.....



Now let us talk of slaughter and the slain

Cows also influence distant locations and blur distinctions in the next section of the poem, as the "smoker's cough" of their animal noises "triggers off from drumlin/ to drumlin an emphysemantiphon/ of cows". This example of what Muldoon refers to as "an imarrhage" performs a blending together of disparate ideas and words, which signals the speaker's openness to overcoming oppositions. Even his own attempts to distinguish these earthy cows from idealized, artistic or religious representations of bovinity, like Japan's "metaphysicattle," crumble when the flash of the truck's tail-light brings him back to his surroundings. The cows and the truck combine in the fussed-nonce-word "oscaraboscarabinary," which the speaker defines as "a plain and simple hi-firing party", which echoes the ambiguous ticking car in the Ireland of Muldoon's poem "Why Brownlee Left", but it also presents the unresolved mergers of "Tuaregs" and "drogues" – "desert nomads and boating devices – and entwined twins like the double scarabs" that symbolize death and life.

Paul Muldoon's poem "Wind and Tree" (New Weather) introduces the presence of Frost in its title, which evokes "Tree at my window, window tree." The poem depicts the meeting of the minds of the tree and the speaker, each respectively concerned with "outer" and "inner weather". The speaker



imagines being a tree whose branches break against other trees, then states, "by my broken bones/ I tell new weather."; the poem opens, thus:

In the way that most of the wind

Happens where there are trees,

Most of the world is cantered

About ourselves

At first glance, this self-evident phrase is exhibited as a certainty tailed by a similar condition – just as wind usually seems to blow faster when it penetrates a lot of trees, most of the world is pivoted around man's soul. This assumption, however, does not methodically devise, for though it establishes a man-ecology link, it does not rise up to the status of a truth. As a matter of fact, both statements point to the often tricky impact of outlook. Wind becomes palpable where there are trees, and every individual is captured by a sole standpoint, therefore spiritual being forms the axis for our natural surroundings. The poem imparts a moral: how to scrutinize the physical realm. Muldoon's phrase " In the way that" connotes a suggestion, rather than an affirmation, about human-environment bond.

In "The Waking Father"(New Weather), Paul Muldoon paints an ecologic pastoral scene:



My father and I are catching sprinklies
Out of the Oona river.
They have us feeling righteous,
The way we have thrown them back.
Our benevolence is astounding.

So far, the poem appears as an uncomplicated recollection of a childhood experience, but the following verse inaugurates a new route. Abruptly, the narrator transfers the poem's setting into tropical lands, and envisages his father's being raided:

When my father stood out in the shallows
It occurred to me that
The sprinklies might have been piranhas,
The river a red carpet
Rolling out from where he had just stood.

Both Muldoon's "Christo's" and "The Earthquake" (Meeting the British) lay focus on the Irish landscape. The former shifts from the reminiscence of a plate of asbestos "nailed, at a slight angle,/ to the same-



sized gap between Brandon/ and whichever's the next mountain" to the portrayal of nearby garbage-bags. The spectacle of these sacks consequently forwards his soul through a body of jointly-stuck objects on the verbal or literal level – "sugar-beet,/hay-stacks, silage-pits, building-sites/ a hatched cottage" – a green view where the poem's sees a large amount of provisional pitchy plastic banners exhibited throughout the 1981 Irish starvation stoppage

From the time of huger-strikes,

We drove all day past mounds of sugar-beet,

Hay-stacks, silage-pits, building sites,

A thatched cottage evena'

The speaker fancies the Irish scenery being coated with plastic, like "one of your man's landscape," alluding to the painter Christo, known for his pieces which cover public establishments in diverse substances. At the core of this series of notions lies the question of symbol-making – of the distance between the actual and the ideal – as mirrored in the verse's choppy couplets and failure to offer specified denotations for topographical items or painters. Throughout the poem, Muldoon builds an atmosphere of uncertainty about how things go together and how the ideas of natural and artificial can be blurred. With the landscape covered with plastic, the country becomes a



simulation, and distinctions between the real and the simulacrum lose their sharpness.

In "The Earthquake", Muldoon uses so many compound word images such as: "navy-blue"/ rope-burn," "A cymbal-hiss/from her eight-year-old's drum-kit," "delicately-tufted," "fibre-optics" . Selected from the physical world, these eco-synthesized emblems echo the spatial surroundings that closely encircle the poem's personae, which forms a kind of antithesis to the scene depicting modernization in the penultimate line "Ireland has moved; they haven't".

The jacket of her chalk stripesuit over a straightbacked chair,

Her tie's navyblue ropeburn. -

A cymbalhiss from her eighteen-year-old's drumkit,

A goose saying Boo to some great event?

One delicately-tufeted lynx'sear,

Like "Christo," the poem tries to pinpoint substantial differences between bygone and contemporary lifestyles, providing subjective and municipal images. In the final line the poet handles the issue of a person's connection to the green environment. Compared to "Meeting the British's" "Bechbretha's " and depiction of the feebleness of the individual against the



conqueror material, “The Earthquake’s” preoccupation with passionate tokens might be read as a suggestion of the might of the community; still, the country’s turmoil shake the poem’s couple.

5 - Conclusion

The paper draws on Paul Muldoon’s ecological orientation, as well as his postcolonial nurture, which has produced poems that set men and ecology in a hierarchical state, where the native humans’ relationship to traditional environment determines their vulnerability within a postcolonial context. . In “Hay”, he shows the influence of Anglo-American culture on the Irish society. Muldoon utilizes natural items in order to preserve the nationalistic Irish identity in face of the globalization hegemony. In “Moy Sand and Gravel”, he displays childhood images of the Irish countryside. In “Quoof”, the poet tries to employ verbal imagery taken from the Irish dialect in order to preserve the Irish identity. He takes the postcolonial-ecocritical challenge by displaying green impedance policies which are dynamic and also seriously consider the environment. In “New Weather”, he renders the late 1960s Irish ‘Troubles’. In “News Headlines from the Homer Noble Farm”, he describes how a snake takes off its skin just as colonized peoples give up their old custom. He approaches the ecological more-than-human realm, which highlights the poet’s communal feeling, sparing romantic idealism. In “Hopewell Haiku”, he predicts an eco-postcolonial future scene



in which his children collect snails and pull them out of their shells; he also uses natural images, “hammock”, “narwhal hunt”, narwhal tusk”, to celebrate the primitive life, in the traditional Irish life . In Muldoon’s poems, the ecological entities, including agrarian world and humans, are too simply driven into a situation that is against naturalization.

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