

Bora Ring

by [*Judith Wright*](#)

The song is gone; the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale.

Only the grass stands up
to mark the dancing-ring; the apple-gums
posture and mime a past corroboree,
murmur a broken chant.

The hunter is gone; the spear
is splintered underground; the painted bodies
a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot.
The nomad feet are still.

Only the rider's heart
halts at a sightless shadow, an unsaid word
that fastens in the blood of the ancient curse,
the fear as old as Cain.

Introduction

The poem “Bora Ring” is written by the Australian poet Judith Wright. The poem was written and published in the year 1946. The poem talks about the Bora ceremony as a part of the Australian Aboriginal tradition and culture. The poet talks about how over the years the ceremony is almost extinct and has faded into oblivion. The ceremony is now only present in the Monoceros of the community. The poem focuses on how the colonization of the land pushed the cultures and traditions of the native community to the background.

About the poet

Judith Wright was born in 1915 in Australia. She was a poet, environment activist and an advocate for Aboriginal land rights. She was a critic as well but gained renown due to her poem. Her poems revolved around the themes of the Aboriginal identities and the relationship with the settlers. She received the Christopher Brennan Award for her writing. Some of her major works are “Woman to Man” and “The Moving Image”.

Structure

The poem is written in the elegy form but in free verse. It contains 4 quatrains. A quatrain is a stanza made up of 4 lines.

Stanza 1

The song is gone; the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale.

Summary

The speaker begins the poem by talking about a song. She says that the song is no longer present, it is gone. The speaker then talks about the dance. This dance, the speaker says, is a secret. It is not known to many. The only people who know the secret dance are the dancers buried in the earth. Then the speaker talks about the ritual. She says that the ritual is useless and no one performs it anymore. The speaker says that the tribal story told by the ritual is also lost and is now an alien tale.

Analysis

The poet begins by talking about the ritual. The ritual consists of a song and a dance. Both of these things are lost to time and imperialism. She says that the song is gone. By this, the poet means that it is lost and not performed anymore. The dance too is forgotten. It is now a secret only known to the “dancers in the earth”. The dancers in the earth stand for the older generation.

The earlier generation, which is dead now, is buried with the dance. The poet talks about how the ritual of Bora is useless as it is not performed or “used” anymore. The poet also talks about the story of the tribe taught by the ritual has also been lost. The tribal story is like an alien or an unknown tale now.

Stanza 2

Only the grass stands up
to mark the dancing-ring; the apple-gums
posture and mime a past corroboree,
murmur a broken chant.

Summary

The speaker says that now only the grass and the trees remember the ritual. She says that the presence of the ritual is only marked by the grass. The marks of the dancing rings are still present on the grass. Another mark of the ritual is the posture of the Apple-gum trees. The apple-gum trees’ postures reflect the corroboree dance. The speaker uses the nature and landscape of the country to mark the absence of the ritual.

Analysis

The poet brings in the marks left behind by the ritual on nature and the land. She creates the image of the grass and trees lamenting the loss of the ritual. The grass stands testament to the forgotten ritual. It still bears the marks made for the dancing rings during the Bora Ring ceremony.

The poet also talks about the apple-gums tree, an evergreen native tree of Australia. She talks about how the trees' posture looks like the posture of the dancers during Corroboree. Corroboree is a dance ceremony of the indigenous communities of Australia. By bringing in natural images, the poet puts emphasis on the deep indent left by the rituals of the community, even on the landscape.

Stanza 3

The hunter is gone; the spear
is splintered underground; the painted bodies
a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot.
The nomad feet are still.

Summary

The speaker in this stanza talks about the cultural identity of the indigenous communities. She says that the hunter is gone and the spear is broken and buried underground. The painted bodies of the hunters and the aboriginal people are now nothing but a dream that the world has forgotten. The traditions of the indigenous people are forgotten by the world like the broken spear and the painted bodies. The speaker says that the feet of the nomad are still. The nomad is the indigenous community whose culture has been killed by the imperial powers.

Analysis

The poet talks about the history of the aboriginal people. She talks about how the ancestors of the indigenous communities hunted for a living. The aboriginal people were hunters in the past. The poet talks about how "The hunter" is gone now. That identity no longer exists. Neither does the spear that they hunted with. The poet talks about how the traditional spears used by the hunters are left broken and buried underneath the earth.

Traditionally, the aboriginal communities painted their bodies to camouflage as well as to celebrate ceremonies. The poet talks about how the painted bodies are now nothing but a dream forgotten by the world. Even the indigenous communities have been forced to forget their past. The nomad, the culture and traditions, are lying dead and still.

Stanza 4

Only the rider's heart
halts at a sightless shadow, an unsaid word
that fastens in the blood of the ancient curse,
the fear as old as Cain.

Summary

The speaker then talks about a rider. This rider travels the land and is the only one who knows about all the things lost to the colonization. She says that it is only this rider who knows about the rituals lost to time. The rider rides across the country and stops at places of historical and cultural significance and sees a “sightless shadow” of the past.

These things are invisible and inaudible. The “unsaid word” is heard only by the rider and brings fear and pain into the heart of the rider as she remembers the ancient curse of violence and bloodshed. This curse is as old as the curse of Cain.

Analysis

The poet here talks about “the rider”. This rider could be the speaker or the persona of the poet herself. She rides across the land and the cultural history of the indigenous communities and looks at the places of cultural importance. She looks at the “sightless shadows” of the past which no longer exist and can not be seen anymore. She hears the “unsaid word” of the “ancient curse”.

This ancient curse is a reference to the curse of Cain from the Bible. The curse is full of sin, bloodshed and violence. The poet makes the reference to Cain’s curse to emphasize on the anger and pain she feels due to the violent imperialism of the Aboriginal communities.

A highly acclaimed critic of Australian poetry, *Judith Wright* is also a well-known poet and short-story writer who was an uncompromising campaigner for Aboriginal land rights. Her poetic images characteristically draw from the Australian flora and fauna, yet contain a mythic substrata. She was sensitive enough to notice that the European colonialists have destroyed the originality of the country and this forms the central theme of her whole poetic output. She was brought up in the atmosphere of colonialism and had painfully noticed how their original culture, ways of life and music and literature even the complete history had been completely destroyed.

The poem entitled “*Bora Ring*” is a powerful voice of Judith Wright in favour of the aboriginal Australians and in this short poem she expresses her dislike and deep twinge for the colonial forces. Actually Bora Rings are circles in the ground constructed from earth and stone, typically associated with religious ceremonies of the Aboriginal society. Since the

colonisation of the British, the annihilation of Australia's Bora Rings took place cosmically. Urbanization coupled with a disrespect for indigenous values have been responsible for the demise of these cultural sites and values. The poetess' first hand experiences of the dismal conditions since childhood aided to the intense graphic sincerity in her sympathies.

The poem begins with the expression of deep anguish and agony at the extermination of the ethnicity of the native Australians which was destroyed by the Europeans. The persona pines for the lost dance of the aborigines-

***“The song is gone; the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale.
Only the Grass stands up
to mark the dancing -ring;”***

The colonisers have rooted out the wellspring and means of all original entertainment: the singing, the dancing, the performances have truncated to isolation. The chants of their unusual and unique, script less songs of a certain dialect are no more audible and tall grass has grown.

The aboriginal civilisation is one of hunters and gatherers. Since the advent of the whites, hunting is no more than a dream. All that one discovers of the activities of the native people of Africa is through their broken spears, bows, arrows and boomerangs excavated out by the archaeologists. The cult of painting bodies while dancing, their hunting ethnography; all doomed. The aborigines were forgotten, and so are their memories.

***“The hunter is gone; the spear
is splintered underground; the painted bodies
a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot.”***

The settlement of the colonisers pushed the natives into jungles. Seldom, they would be seen trespassing the farms but now the nomadic feet no longer encroaches on the lands of the settlers. The persona bewails the cessation of the natives. The introduction of the biblical allusion of Cain in the poem is of great metaphorical magnitude. Cain, the elder son of Adam and Eve committed fratricide on his brother Abel, out of sheer jealousy. Well, the colonisers show similarity by killing the native brother-settlers. The bitter truth is that the strong and clever should destroy the weak and helpless which is a tendency that is present in our genes. Surely, jealousy and the will to power are regrettably pathological tendencies.

***“ The nomad feet are still.
Only the rider's heart
halts at a sightless shadow,
an unsaid word that fastens in the blood of the ancient curse,
the fear as old as Cain. ”***

To conclude we can say that Wright's poem is an elegy for lost Aboriginal culture, but is also simultaneously an elegy for the European culture which has supplanted it; and implicitly too a protest poem of an explicitly political nature.

As M.H. Abrams averred on Postcolonialism,

“The mode of imperialism imposed its power not by force, but by the effective means of disseminating in subjugated colonies a Eurocentric discourse that assumed the normality and pre-eminence of everything ‘occidental’, correlatively with its representations of the ‘oriental’ as an exotic and inferior other.”