

A STUDY OF COUNTERPARTS: INDIAN ADIVASI AND LE GUIN'S ATHSHEANS

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The aboriginal people in India, i.e. the *Adivasi* communities and Le Guin's Athsheans are counterparts of each other regarding their rich cultural heritage, their subtle and intimate relationships, their dreaming and visionary power, their mindhearing and mindreading ability, their ecological balanced life. Both, the Indian *Adivasis* and Le Guin's Athsheans have been facing a common challenge from the so called developed, advanced and modern people-- Indian world power people and the exponent of colonialism respectively. By and large, the point made in the paper is that the Indian *Adivasi* communities and 'Athsheans' in Le Guin's Hugo Award winning thought-experimented science fiction, *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) are not only the counterparts of each other regarding their claiming of the heritage but they also share the common grounds of mutual exclusivism and creative complementarity of their overall life-style. The thesis presented in the present paper is that the assimilation of both of the aboriginal communities into the so called mainstream on the basis of colonialism is not at all possible; rather their life-style their culture, their ecological balanced life is the panacea, an antidote to the inhumane, and ideological colonialism.

The Word for World is Forest (1972) is a novel about politics and ecology. It presents the theme of colonization and exploitation. The novel's title announces its focus on language. The relationship between the Athsheans and their external world is revealed in the fact that "the Athshean *word* for world is also the word for *forest*" (72). Further, the relationship between the Athsheans and their internal world is revealed in the fact that the "word 'dream'... was also the word for 'root'" (100). For the natives the forest is the world. In their language the same word

serves for both. The title is literally true. These people see themselves as extensions of the forest. Their various family clans are named after kinds of trees, like the ash and the oak. To be related by blood is to be of the same tree. They also internalize their forest landscape through their language. Words describing mental states are taken from words referring to trees. *The Word for World is Forest* represents the conflict between the natives of the heavily forested world Athshe and the Terran colonists who invade and despoil this world. Biology and race-relationship are the bases of this novella.

Le Guin in the novel severely criticizes and condemns colonialism of the Terrans represented by Davidson and she also appreciates the Athshean who preserves the nature and the system of ecology. The Athsheans are the counterparts of the *Adivasi* community in India regarding their perspective towards the nature and culture. The struggle between Davidson's aggressive colonists and the gentle natives is manifested initially in their differing attitudes toward the forest, the nature. To the Athshean the word for world is forest. On the planet 'Athshe' the natives have developed a culture that is an integral part of the forest which covers the planet. They are similar to the Gethenians in developing within their planet's ecology. Nowhere has land been cleared to provide room for the human species or to provide resources for extensive technological development. Instead they are a decentralized society, living in scattered villages that fit into the tree roots and soil. Integration has also been achieved internally. They have learned to control their dreams so that their actions result from both the subconscious in dreaming and from the conscious mind in the nondreaming state. They speak of the equality of "dream-time" and "world-time" (106).

Contrasted to the nonaggressive, ecologically sensitive culture are the representatives from Earth's culture. Having nearly destroyed their own planet by pollution and by exhaustion of natural resources, they have now come to exploit Athshe's forests. For the Terrans, trees are merely objects. The dense dark forest seems alien and frightening to them, and is valued only as a source of wood merely material wealth for their use. At this future time, the earth has virtually run out of trees, and the purpose of this colonization is to exploit the vast resources of the forest. The trees, which have such subjective spiritual value for the Athsheans, have for the Terrans merely political and commercial value as products. The Terran name for this world is New

Tahiti. The Athsheans are a totally nonaggressive people: “rape, violent assault, and murder virtually don’t exist among them” (61). To achieve this state they have cultivated certain aggression-halting postures and procedures. Charlotte Spivack (1984:69) describes the non-violence way of the Athsheans:

To assume a prone position on the back, with head turned and throat exposed, for example, is absolutely effective in turning away any attack. Another universally recognized procedure among them is ritual singing. The Athsheans have learned to sing competitively as an artistic substitute for and sublimation of warfare. When Selver has an opportunity to kill Davidson, whom he has learned to hate, he stays his hand and sings instead.

Another distinctive trait of the Athsheans is their remarkable dreaming ability. Dreams are the roots of their waking activities. However, dreaming is not an exclusive feature of sleeping. These people, especially the more gifted dreamers among them, follow a polycyclic sleep pattern, quite unlike the alteration of sleep and waking accepted by the Terrans. A 120-minute cycle is the unit of rhythm necessary to them for both day and night, which is why they cannot be conditioned into an eight-hour work day without suffering severe psychological damage. The secret is stated as:

Once you have learned to do your dreaming wide awake, to balance your sanity not on the razor’s edge of reason but on the double support, the fine balance, of reason and dream; once you have learned that, you cannot unlearn it any more than you can unlearn to think (99).

‘Time’ is also a matter of difference between the two nations. Furthermore, Athsheans’ their periods of peak energy are at dawn and dusk, not at midday which the Terrans regard as the appropriate time for activity. The dream visions of the Athsheans influence their religion as well as other facets of their lives. As their leaders are the best dreamers, their gods are those who can translate the dream vision into experience. Their word for God is “*sha’ab*” which also means “translator.” The god is thus a link between the two realities of dream-time and world-time, one who can speak the perceptions of the unconscious. “To ‘speak’ that tongue is to act. To do a new thing. To change, or to be changed, radically, from the root” (106).

The language which distinguishes Selver's chapters consists of images and metaphors that reflect the Athshean integration with their environment. Further, there is no inequality suggested in the language used to describe events from world-time and events from dream-time. The dominant images and metaphors of the Athsheans are of forest and path, but metaphors of animals are also important. The Selver chapters reproduce what it would be like to be part of a race which saw itself as one of several living forms collaborating to produce the world. Le Guin thrusts the reader into the insider's view in the lyrical opening paragraph of chapter 2:

No way was clear, no light unbroken, in the forest. Into wind, water, sunlight, starlight, there always entered leaf and branch, bole and root, the shadowy, the complex. Little paths ran under the branches, around the boles, over the roots; they did not go straight, but yielded to every obstacle, devious as nerves....The colors of rust and sunset kept changing in the hanging leaves of the copper willows, and you could not say even whether the leaves of the willows were brownish-red, or reddish-green, or green (25-26).

The description places the forest in the foreground and the other features of nature in the background; the paths make way for the forest. Ideas of color, age, voices, kinship are all expressed in forest metaphors. The Athsheans' decentralized sociopolitical structure is modeled after their forest world. The clans and villages remain as separate and distinct as different species of trees, and yet their overall similarity is as evident as a forest. People are identified by clans, which are named after trees, and clans form villages. Le Guin uses forest metaphors and path to express mental states and sociopolitical conditions. To the Athsheans mental health is a condition of being in touch with one's roots. As Selver recovers from leading the first attack on Smith Camp, he gradually resumes the complex, daily cycle of dreaming. His relief is expressed in terms of forest conditions: "He had feared that he was cut off from his roots that he had gone too far into the dead land of action ever to find his way back to the springs of reality. Now though the water was very bitter, he drank again" (38). When Selver tries to explain to other Athsheans what the Terrans are like – the people who are destroying the forest and who rape, castrate, and kill the Athsheans – he suggests that "they have left their roots behind them"(44). The path metaphor is used by the Athsheans to express tradition and change as well as mental health. The Old Dreamer, Coro Mena, in trying to assess whether or not Selver is insane, asks, "Can you walk

the road your dream goes?”(32), meaning, can you follow the route of the subconscious and so learn what it has to say about your fears? Just as new paths have to be found through the forest as the trees and undergrowth change, so the Athshean must be able to adjust. As a god Selver comes “through the forest, where leaves fall, where trees fall” (35) meaning that he is not following a path that already exists. Selver teaches them how to kill and destroy, that’s why he is called the “son of forest-fire” (46). Where Davidson simply used animal metaphors to signal someone of little or no value, the Athsheans criticize the yumens by comparing them only to animals that are dangerous or are pests – snakes, stinging ants, insects that feed on carrion. In fact, when Selver feels the animal metaphor is being used as a synonym for the “humans,” he hastens to correct the speaker. The headwoman of Berre says the yumens are “great naked spiders,” (137) and Selver asserts, “They are men, men, like us, men” (*Ibid.*). And she adds, “Oh, my dear lord god, I know it, I only meant they *look* like spiders” (*Ibid.*). The contrast between Davidson and Selver on the basis of language is well exposed by Elizabeth Cummins (1990:100) as: “Where Davidson’s language created a world of adversarial relationships, the Athshean language shows relationships of continuities of dualities that are not competitions.” Selver’s actions reveal the mental state of one who has changed and who continues to choose to go against his culture’s ethic in order to ensure the culture’s survival. As Coro Mena says to him, “You’ve done what you had to do, and it was not right” (33-34).

Selver the dreamer becomes such a god, but the new thing he speaks is a bad dream. He speaks killing. Selver has suffered even beyond the exploitation he has shared with his fellows. His own wife was raped by Davidson and died either in the act or immediately thereafter. Selver had then attacked Davidson physically, in itself an unheard of action. Rescued by Lyubov, Selver recovers from the brutal blows sustained in the fight, only to dream and to translate for his fellows the idea of killing members of one’s own species. Needless to say, the colonists suffer the consequences of this new dream-reality. Selver’s concluding actions as a god are to ensure the end of the killing. He negotiates a treaty between the Athsheans and Terrans, and he gives Davidson the gift of “not killing” (160). Rather than turning Davidson over to the Terrans who would surely execute him, Selver treats him like one of his own people who has gone insane and is dangerous. He sends him to complete his life on an isolated island where he must remain alone

and unable to escape, for there is not a tree left with which to build a boat. The fact is that Davidson dug his own grave, nails his own coffin. The policy of isolating the murderer has its obverse in the conclusion of the novel – isolation of the potential victim.

The present novel has a very apt message to the world and is not merely an entertainment. Charlotte Spivack (1984: 71) rightly remarks: “Written in a mood of protest against the American military action in Vietnam, this novella is not meant to be entertainment.” Thus, the Vietnam war was a source of Le Guin’s anger and frustration that led to the writing of *The Word for World is Forest*, that event is only one of several in her contemporary 1960s and 1970s world that could make her lose hope that humankind would ever find the language, ethics, and technology to lessen alienation and finds the “modality of integration and integrity” that she searches for in her Hainish world. In light of Le Guin’s presentation in *The Left Hand of Darkness* of the value of joining the larger human community, the League’s decision in *The World for Word is Forest* to set Atshe beyond the league boundaries must surely be judged in the same words Coro Mena used for Selver: “You’ve done what you had to do, and it was not right” (33-34). In short, by stating that assimilation on the basis of colonialism is not possible, *The Word for World is Forest* stands as the antithesis of the Hanish world.

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