

**Racism Tolls Trees: An Ecological post-colonial study
of Naomi Shihab Nye's "The Man who Hated Trees"**

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Abstract

The poem “The Man who Hated Trees” by the poet Naomi Shihab Nye, has a shocking title, who is the man who can hate trees, and what are those trees which he hates? The study looks at the attitude of hate, its mental bases, and physical manifestations, specifically the racist ones, which pave the way to viewing this racial hate from the lenses of post-colonial studies, specifically, what can be the physical colonial consequence of this hatred against trees, and finds that it is the militant type, similar to what the literary league of the “*te ao marama*” finds, which allows the comparison between the militant actions against trees, with the militant crimes committed against nature, thus the study takes the post-colonial findings and emphasises them from the views of ecological studies in injustice against the environment and the ecosystem, and specifically, against the homeland and native trees of the poet’s homeland; the Occupied lands of Palestine.

Keywords: Racism, colonialism, military, “*te ao marama*”.

Introduction

Ecology attempts to “investigate the workings of these natural communities in order to maintain and encourage a rich interconnectivity of life, while also investigating the elements that disturb this harmony, ultimately resulting in the extinction of animals... [and] plants.” (Aziz & Mohammed p.84). To disturb plants could be seen as an act against the natural justice of the ecosystem.

Such an injustice as Dana Alston (1951-1999) who had a rich career as an activist for environmental and social justice, (“The Summit: Transforming a Movement | Reimagine!”). She sees “the issues of the environment do not stand alone by themselves. They are not narrowly

defined. Our vision of the environment is woven into an overall framework of social, racial, and economic justice” (Whitehead, pp. 664-5).

When defining racism “most scholars agree that it comprises a problematic complex set of practices... [and] beliefs” including “disrespect, opposition, hatred, violence, injustice, preventing others’ rights, discrimination, inequality, harassment and so on. It is fed by prejudice and pejorative beliefs.” (Sahib, p.3). Additionally, racism “have allowed European societies to avoid taking responsibility for the consequences of their colonial activities in Africa and beyond” (A. Naser, p. 44). Therefore, it becomes clear that one should look into how the climate change is no longer the sole cause of any destructions upon plants, including trees.

The study of ecology ties to the postcolonial studies, as mentioned:

According to J.M. Wilson new issues have been raised within the domain of postcolonial studies such as “migration and diaspora, the sacred, the environment (ecocriticism), globalization-” and these were included in the second edition of his publication *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* that was published in 2006 after ten years from the previous edition in 1995. (Mohammed & A. Naser p.2).

Shokhan Mohammed Fatah says “to understand post colonialism better, two terms should be explained: Colonial and anti-colonial discourses.” (p. 85), the colonial discourse relates to how colonialists see themselves as the centre of the world, and are the better race, given more rights, to the point where they believe they have the right to own another person, “racism, therefore, means the connection between a group’s physical qualities to their cultural, intellectual and psychological attributes to be savages and inferior... racism became a major concept and practice among the masters and the slaves.” (Fatah, p. 89)

Methodology

Elizabeth Deloughery who is “a professor in the English Department and the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at UCLA... teaches postcolonial and Indigenous literature courses on the environment, globalization, critical ocean studies, and the Anthropocene and climate change,” (Loyal, 2024) Deloughery highlights the phrase “wars of light”, which is concerned about human emancipation, by exploring the human costs of the United States militarisation, specifically the AK-47 machine in relation to the atomic testing and experiments, in the past, Fig Island literature, which is the post-colonial criticism of what she calls the “wars of light”, (Garrard 2014, pp.15-16).

The phrase concerns how she addresses the historical points of colonialism and neo liberalism and new colonial traces in that area, specifically the ‘*te ao marama*’ which means the world of light, in Māori is a belief centred around how “the natural world forms a cosmic family, in the traditional Māori view. The weather, birds, fish and trees, sun and moon are related to each other, and to the people of the land.” This view of the world reflects on their understanding of the world state and how it changes, which is why they link light and the world in its natural state with peace; “day and night were called *Te Ao* (light) and *Te Pō* (darkness). Māori linked light with peace and understanding, and darkness with conflict and confusion. The rising and setting of the sun also symbolised the cycle of birth and death.” (Taonga, 2007).

Therefore, the sun and light in Māori are natural and ordinary, however, Deloughery in her discussion of the global implications and effects of atmospheric weapons, she compares weapons such as the “Bravo” atomic bomb to a sun that is not ordinary. Bravo testing, which is an atomic bombs test, harmed Islanders greatly, for the impact of Bravo’s full hours is estimated to be 1000 times more in force than the Hiroshima

Nagasaki bombs, the Bravo's fallout has been found as far as Japan's rain, bravo alongside 2000 nuclear tests. For Deloughery, Bravo turned the world from being a "pre-atomic" to a "post atomic" space, their effect soiled the water, atmosphere, and plants, and therefore, the human bones, globally, every human court "now" carries "strontium-90", this is "a man made byproduct of nuclear detonations" (Garrard 2014, pp. 329-330).

The literary league¹ of the "*te ao marama*" for Deloughery starts with a poet named Hone Tuwhare (1922-2008), (Taonga, n.d.), whose Māori poem "No Ordinary Sun" (1964), is an elegy for life on earth after Bravo, as he tries to fight back the rhetoric that nuclear bombs are as natural as the sun, and the allegory of light turns destructive, as it is the image of erasing the other, turning the world "shadowless", for every part of the earth is covered by light, that of the no ordinary sun, of atomic bombs, (Garrard 2014, p. 331).

Garrard points out that post-colonial studies help humans frame the colonial-military globalization for it being the "enlightenment vision of global encirclement", and it is among the stated goals of eco-criticism and ecology to reverse this vision, (Garrard 2014, p. 333). Hone was fighting back this vision by reversing its meaning, by what Garrard calls a "plant-thought" against hegemony, which means, that for ecocriticism to achieve its goal, ecopoems and (Garrard 2014, p. 334).²

There seems to be a growing anxiety over the global scope of climate change, which has been seen in both ecopoetics and postcolonial studies. Both fields have an interest in describing the process of shaping planet Earth as a one wholistic globe, and in testing how literature contributes to shaping the collective consciousness of humans in a way that meets such

How Elizabeth Deloughery describes them.¹
Elaborate on sun²

process. (Garrard 2014, p. 320). Examining the ramifications of foundational narratives, challenging presumptions of a universal subject and essentialised nature, and analysing the naturalisation of systems of dominance are some of the tasks associated with postcolonial ecocriticism. The use of homogenising narratives in globalisation discourse that disregard the history of empire and its continuing legacies of violence has also drawn criticism from postcolonial studies. (Garrard 2014, p. 321). The poem *Man Who Hated Trees* addresses this concern, in the style of the ‘*te ao marama*’.

Previous Studies

The study ‘*The most hated tree in America: negative difference, the White imaginary, and the Bradford pear*’ by Ryan Neville-Shepard and Casey Ryan Kelly, demonstrates how racial logics persist in more commonplace discourses and so reinforce signifiers of difference in us-them logics, this paper examined an argument over a tree. Ashmore's (2016) well-known diatribe, which moralised a tree discussion, urged readers to place the blame on themselves and acknowledge that their ‘solitary Bradford pear growing in your yard is what caused this problem,’ eventually holding them accountable for ‘hundreds of evil progeny’ (para. 10). Audiences are urged to take a stance, protect borders for the sake of purity, and help build foreigners as a threat by the discourse against the Bradford pear. The faulty racist logic is thus harmful to the trees and the region of their growth.

While the study ‘*Ecocritical Concerns in the Selected Poems of Mahmoud*

Darwish and Naomi Shihab Nye’ by Amna Shamim compares between the stylistic uses of nature, the sublime, and wilderness in the poetics of the

poets mentioned in her title, and finds that they mostly depict nature the same way, while differ in depicting the other concepts. Shamim studies Naomi Shihab Nye's poems "Jerusalem", "Blood", "A Palestinian Might Say", and "My Father and the Fig Tree", she finds that nature is a mere spectator upon the conflicts between humans, and that the Fig tree is a call of nostalgia upon her Palestinian father's heart.

This study however, looks into the racism shown in Nye's poem "The Man who Hated Trees", and thus has a novelty not too dissimilar to the previous studies.

Analysis

Naomi Shihab Nye's "*The Man Who Hated Trees*". Who is a Palestinian American poet, children's author, essayist, and educator whose work often revolves around her upbringing and experiences as an Arab American. Her autobiographical young adult novel *Habibi* (1997), which won the Jane Addams Children's Book Award in 1998, describes an Arab American family who moves to the West Bank and braves prejudice and violence to ultimately find connection and acceptance. (Britanica). Topics, which are revisited in the selected poem.

Nye has won numerous honours for her contributions to children's and young adult literature, including the 2013 NSK Neustadt Award for Children's Literature, as well as for her writings for adults, including multiple Pushcart Prizes and the 1998 Academy of American Poets' Lavan Award. She served as an international ambassador of poetry on the Board of Chancellors of the Academy of American Poets from 2010 to 2015. She became the 2019–22 Poetry Foundation's Young People's Poet Laureate and was the guest editor for the Academy of American Poets' Poem-a-Day program in April 2022. (Britanica).

A contributor to *Contemporary Southern Writers* wrote that Nye's poetry "resembles the meditative poetry of William Stafford, Wallace Stevens, and Gary Snyder," (Poetry Foundation). Who are notable ecopoets.

Like her mentor, William Stafford, Nye again and again manifests her "belief in the value of the overlooked, the half-forgotten," wrote Clausi, as well as investigating global concerns like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A reviewer for *Publisher's Weekly* found that "Nye's witnessings of everyday life and strife never quite acquire collective force, yet they convey a delicate sense of moral concern and a necessary sense of urgency." (Poetry Foundation).

The poem ' *The Man Who Hated Trees* ' published in May 1982 by Poetry Magazine, (Poetry Foundation). The poem has also been vocalised by JW Pepper in 2018, and the vocalisation had been described as:

A musical setting of the poem, *The Man Who Hated Trees*, by Naomi Shihab Nye. The music attempts to depict a not-very-nice barber, who not only "spent years shaving the necks of cafeteria managers" but found every excuse he could to justify cutting down trees.

The cutting of trees seems to be the central focus of not only the character, but the centre of which the poem draws its settings including the character of the man in the title, and therefore, the point it wants to make.

When he started blaming robberies
on trees, you knew for sure
something was wrong.

The speaker in Nye's conveys the same concerns and provides the same solutions through the very careful wording; she seems to make an

analogy revolving around the false ideologies causing the colonial and ecological injustice effect upon the occupied Palestinian lands, trees, and people.

Among such false ideologies is the supremacy of a race upon another; racism, which is what the poem addresses, and characterises in the man who hated trees;

The speaker starts reporting the aggressive reaction of a male character, saying "something was wrong," the speaker doesn't clarify what is "wrong", leaving place for the reader to determine that it is the ideology of the man that which is wrong, whether it is wrong in of itself, or for what it may cause, if it is not clear yet.

This man who clipped hair,
who spent years shaving the necks of cafeteria managers,
sweeping lost curls down drains,
this man who said, "It is always better to cut off a little too much..."

The speaker introduces more of the man; his profession, which is presented grotesquely, through the juxtaposition of cutting hair to cutting necks, as seen from the wording, which is specifically placed to make the barber's character vague yet horrifying, a euphemism and a metaphor in an extended metaphor (town, streets, etc), the words of the speaker don't say "shaving hairs on necks", but "shaving necks", a euphemism for cutting necks of "cafeteria managers", characters yet unidentified, yet have a difference to the barber by means of profession.

Then the speaker quotes the man on his own thoughts as to why he leads his carrier in such an extremist style "this man who said, "It is always better to cut off a little too much...", the man seems to think he benefit from the grotesque ways of his own business. It is important that the speaker of the poem shows the way than man talks, because

talking is a part of language, and as “language is the means followed in expressing emotions,” (Hussein & Alsaidi, p. 20). It becomes clear that the poet intends to emphasises what this hateful man feels, not only as confirmation of how he views the matter of cutting too much, but to link this matter to the feeling of hatred he carries.

You could say he transferred
one thing to another when he came home,

"This tree drops purple balls
on the roof of my car.
That tree touches the rain gutter.
I don't like blossoms, too much mess.
Trees take up the sky.
It's my light, why share it?"
He said thieves struck more
on blocks where there were trees.
"The shade, you know. They like the dark."
You lived for days with the buzz of his chain-saw
searing off the last little branches of neighborly³ affection.

The speaker reports what the man says, does, and thinks, most striking report is of the man's false claiming of ownership upon light “it's my light”, the man's expression of the light of the town strips any image which could be presented when talking about the word, much like her a cut a neck, much like he cuts “affection”.

The physical cutting of bodies he does by hand, and verbal cutting of affection and peaceful relationships he does, by singling himself as the one with the right to own the light of the sun upon the town, is yet another racist dimension of this man being revealed, as he sees himself the one superior enough to have more rights, this racist assumption “is motivated

[sic]³

by the concept of difference that is proposed and sustained in a hierarchy of order which is almost claimed to be natural'', (Fredrickson, p.1 as cited in Sahib p.3). The nature of the irrationality of the right of owning the sun reflects how the poet sees racism as something irrational itself.

The line "thieves ... blocks" is another insight in the character's mentality, as a man who judges the social status and ethics of whom he alleges as robbers, not based on facts, but of the space they live and come from, much like a racist. This judgement comes from the negative feeling the man has for his neighbours and their trees, promoted by his racist mentality, this is an example of how the word racism could "describe all the negative hostile feelings towards others and the actions emerging from such an attitude (Fredrickson, p.1 as cited in Sahib p.3).

A recent United Nations report stated, "There can be no meaningful solution to the global climate and ecological crisis without addressing systemic racism." (United Nations). Racism and the climate issue feed into each other, as extracted from what Mark Whitehead says about "the creation and maintenance of metropolitan woodland is not only marked by questions of distributional justice (who gets which trees where), but also by more insidious forms of procedural justice that generate both racial and class-based inequalities", (p. 671). This relates to the following narrative from a submission to Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Pursuant to Human Rights Council Resolution 47/24 "Human Rights and Climate Change":

Wrapped around a halo of environmental concerns, the Jewish National Fund-led afforestation projects are branded by Israel as a major tool to combat climate change. However, the Jewish National Fund, a semi State body, is a key agent in implementing Israel's expanding colonization of Palestinian lands.

From 15 to 19 August 2021, severe and extensive wildfires destroyed 2,000 hectares of European pine tree forests planted in the outskirts of Jerusalem. As the blaze abated, the landscape rigged with burnt trees revealed the ruins of Palestinian villages destroyed and ethnically cleansed during the Nakba, and their adjacent 400- year-old agricultural terraces that used to be planted with native tree species, including fig and olive trees and vines. Since 1948, 4,300,000 trees have been planted by the Jewish National Fund, 67 percent of which on the ruins of some 89 Palestinian villages forcibly displaced in 1948. Most of the preferred species sown were conifers to provide a European cover to a new alien landscape, and their lack of 4 adaptative capacities to the dry and hot climate of Palestine renders them highly vulnerable to climate change-related wildfires. While Israel has played upon its environmental discourse and the environmental benefits of afforestation, stressing its role in mitigating climate change through carbon fixation, they primarily function as a green camouflage to war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the prevention of the right of return of millions of Palestinian refugees to their original villages, as provided for under Article 13(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 12(4) of the ICCPR⁴. (pp. 3-4).

This is an example of how racism becomes far reaching not only on the human lives, but it tools trees too. Same as racism against humans singles out targeted communities and supresses them, this incident of racism supresses the natural order of trees in the hometown of the poet, and thus it is an act of ecological injustice.

Additionally, the poem presents a unique case of trees uprooting, as seen by how it is titled with the verb ‘hated’, a verb from the past, while the poem emphasises this hate as the consistent state of the man, this alignment of times is not illogical, when one considers that the man had cut all the trees, in all the ways and excuses he could find, to the point that trees became a thing of the past, not his hatred, which is constant and overarching, like the sun which is not ordinary from ‘No Ordinary Sun’, an effect brought up due to the far reach of the racism it comes from, because racism itself is outreaching as Dr. Wafaa Sahib says ‘racism is not confined to a specific place or time seems to be a

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.⁴

fact. Saying that it is found in different forms and levels in various times and places of this universe is another undeniable fact.” (p.2).

It was planting-season in the rest of the town
but your street received a crew-cut.

Presenting cutting as an unjustifiable and cruel act, in contrast to planting, which is taking place in the imagined geographical landscape of the poem, where a street, a space, a part of a town, gives the act of planting a sense of being an act of peace, in opposition to the cruelty of cutting. This leads to how this poem can be seen as an ecological and post-colonial poem, it shows that the acts of colonialism can be overcome.

The lines evoke a feeling of grief and an urgency, to both plant trees to fight back climate change, and an urgency for peace between humans. As well as they invoke a piece of history from the occupied lands of Palestine, being as a street, a part of the world/town, which is the history of the olive trees struggle of being cut down.

Two pecan trees that had taken half-a-century to rise
now stood like Mohawk Indians, shorn.

The pecan tree (Brady) was used by pre-colonial Native Americans (taniam) to make homes and to fight off the harsh weather of Winter, the speaker compares the two pecan trees to the Mohawks, for being “shorn”, cut to halves, as a result of being colonised.

The lines suggest that the unfortunate reality of the Mohawks relates to an inability to plant peace, due to colonialism and their reduction of numbers, as seen from the metaphor of how to only “two pecan trees” remain, few numbers of Mohawk Americans remain today:

Mohawk, Iroquoian-speaking North American Indian tribe and the easternmost tribe of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy. Within the

confederacy they were considered to be the “keepers of the eastern door.” At the time of European colonization, they occupied three villages west of what is now Schenectady, New York. According to some traditional accounts, the Mohawk visionary chief Dekanawida, who preached principles of peace, was instrumental in founding the Iroquois Confederacy. The Mohawk had nine representatives in the confederacy, three each from their Turtle, Wolf, and Bear clans. As with other Iroquois-speaking tribes, the Mohawk warred frequently against neighbouring Algonquian-speakers; the Dutch introduction of firearms during the fur trade increased the number of Mohawk victories. After contact with Europeans, however, the tribe diminished rapidly because of introduced diseases such as smallpox. Most Mohawk allied with the British in the French and Indian War, but some Catholic converts at mission settlements in Canada espoused the French cause and guided expeditions against their former alliance brothers. Population estimates suggested some 47,000 Mohawk descendants in the early 21st century. (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Colonialism and racism go hand in hand, they enable the dehumanising of the targeted communities of people, ‘the racism of colonialism was degrading colonial (or semi-colonized) subjects to the category of the subhuman’ (Sartre, p. 13). And a decay of morality in part of the colonisers and settlers takes place, with no morality, cruelty takes place, thus the speaker reports the extents of cruelty, greed, and pride the man has as a settler coloniser.

He gloated on his porch surrounded by amputations.
You caught him staring greedily
at the loose branches swinging over your roof.
Tomorrow, when everything was cut, what then?

The lines reveal the results of the colonial crimes.

He joked about running over cats
as the last chinaberry crashed,
as the truck came to gather arms and legs,
fingers waving their last farewell.
What stories did he tell himself,
this patriot of springtime, (LOVES HIS COUNTRY DURING SPRING)
and how did it feel to down sprouting boulevards with his bald bald heart?

The speaker wonders with what does the settler man excuses his lack of morality, and excessive pride, leading him to such unjust acts, and

wonders more about the mere stories, the fiction he tells himself to justify himself, among which is blaming trees, and of nationalism, despite being selective nationalism, as he love his country only it is "SPRING", and it is beneficial to him.

This leaves the character of the settler lacking a self-awareness, a gap in his mentality that he fills with racist stereotypes, the mental gap is doubled down at as it also takes the form of a "bald bald heart", a heart twice removed of hairs, which upon the extended metaphor, has been established as a metaphor for plants; a symbol of peace, thus, it is a heart which knows no peace, in favour of racist and nationalistic illusions.

Conclusion

The poem is an anti-colonial piece, that compares the te ao marama style of presenting an anti-military argument, by contrasting how the trees were seen as an unnatural being in the eyes of the villainous man, while a plant-thought based perspective shows the opposite, namely that trees are agents of peace and should not be harmed, as well as the innocent people who live in Occupied Homeland of the poet, which is Palestine. The poem uses grabbing of light to grieve the harm done against both trees and victims, enabled by the racist misleading narratives, that makes the man find the trees unnatural to the point of committing theft.

The racism the character if the man who hated trees displays is a depiction of the colonial racism that the militant colonial acts against the trees in the Occupied lands of Palestine. An issue that seems to persist, however, the poet seems to attempt to remind that peace comes not from sticking to the same prejudice beliefs that birth racism, and it is a tree that should be planted and takes time to grow, this is the plant-thought that

Garrard seems to want to encourage in contemporary post-colonial scholars, and thus their readers.

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