

Far From The Native Crowd: Poetry Writing As Consolation In Pablo Neruda's Isolation

Rayappan J¹, Dr. K.N.Sharmila²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar (P/T) Department of English Annamalai University Chidambaram

²Research Supervisor Assistant Professor English Wing – FEAT Annamalai University.

<p>Keywords : Poetry ,Writing , Consolation, Isolation, Diasporic, Exile,Struggle and Sanctuary .</p>	<p>Abstract This paper makes a critical study how poetry writing became a consolation for Pablo Neruda in his isolation during the painful diasporic experiences in and outside of his own country. It discusses how Poetry Writing played the roles of a companion , an accompany and , to some extent a good Samaritan in the life and career of Pablo Neruda. It records the long struggle of Neruda to overcome the pathetic conditions caused by his self imposed isolation and by his exile due to the diplomatic duties outside his nation. It gives an account of Neruda's encounter with poetry writing by which he attempted to cross the milestones of his melancholic memories from his childhood. It displays how Neruda filled the emptiness of his alienation, desperation and isolation with the help of his poetry. It justifies that Poetry, as a caring mother, looks after the pensive and the introverted personality of Neruda by providing him a sanctuary to get rid of his indifferent world of loneliness. And it deals with an idea of Neruda of exploiting the vast spaces of his secluded universe in order to create a world of poetry.</p>
--	--

INTRODUCTION

Born in Chile, Pablo Neruda went to various countries as a Diplomat including Ceylon, Myanmar, Singapore and Spain where he underwent a severe sense of alienation as he was far away from his motherland and he felt like a fish out of water. Survival in the soil of somebody's land spoiled the Psyche of Neruda into a personality of mental disorder. When Neruda became a full-time party member of the Communist Party in Chile , he was elected as a Senator. As a firebrand Communist Senator, Neruda started to fight through the historical speech "I Accuse " against the exploitation of the labourers of the Nitrate Mines in Chile which infuriated the ruling party . As Neruda went for the second marriage without giving divorce to his first wife, the ruling party issued an order of arrest warrant against Neruda on the charges of Bigamy. Following the issued arrest warrant, Neruda escaped from his country in disguise and his exile made his life very challenging one in which he had to come across a lot of tight corners. Right from his childhood, Neruda remained an introvert as he lost his mother at his early age and the loss of his mother and the absence of her presence kept on haunting him throughout his life and as a result of this, Neruda mentally migrated from the mainstream of the mass of his motherland. Neruda's diplomatic duty in the overseas, his exile to escape from the arrest and his innate character of introvert personality -all pushed Neruda to encounter with the cruel faces of diasporic experiences. Despite the daredevils of desolations deep-rooted in the mind of Pablo Neruda, he could overcome all these nightmares with the help of poetry writing. He was safeguarded by poetry and to some extent, Poetry Writing became a Redeemer to Pablo Neruda from the clutches of Isolation. The topic of this paper is partially derived with a slight modification from the title of Thomas Hardy's novel " Far From the Madding Crowd ".

Poetry Writing As a Consolation to Pablo Neruda in His Isolation.

Isolation is an island where man is forced to reside with walls unwatched by fellow human beings and the walls are constructed with the mixture of desolation, despair and disintegration. It is a secret and secluded mindroom of human beings in which they face their identity crisis. It is an internal prison to ruminate the innumerable memories of the time gone. It engulfs a large space and time in the life of every individual. It leaves a vast space of emptiness to be filled by so many things. Human beings , as

a social animal, they try to break the barriers of mind and attempt to live together with fellow human beings. For few people, it is a difficult task to pass over their isolation and they go in search of alternatives as remedies of consolation for their isolation. The remedies are always different according to the individuals. For some people, it is music that becomes a consolation ; for few, it is drinks which provides consolation in their isolation ; for some other, it is books that gives the consolation. For Pablo Neruda, it is Poetry Writing that becomes a consolation in his isolation. He had to meet a double troubled face of diasporic experiences that are not only external but also internal. His exile and diplomatic duties in alien soils become an external one for him that caused him a diasporic trauma and his inborn character with introvert personality kept him away far from the native crowd as an internal one to suffer from a sense of self alienation . Throughout his life, Neruda chose poetry to chase his sense of alienation . He kept on fighting against the cruel clutches of isolation with the help of poetry writing . The survival of Pablo Neruda was determined by the arrival of poetry into his life as he mentioned in one of his poem entitled “*Poetry*” as follows :

Poetry arrived
In search of me. I don't know, I don't know where
It came from, from winter or a river.
I don't know how or when,
no, they were not voices, they were not
words, nor silence,
but from a street it called me,
from the branches of night,
abruptly from the others,
among raging fires
or returning alone,
there it was, without a face,
and it touched me.

Neruda tried to trace the nexus between poetry writing and himself in an interesting way in the above given poem. He described poetry as a revelation that came to him as a visitor. But, he was not able to find out its roots and routes. Instead, he assumed the origins and the departure place of his poetry with the wings of imagination. He guessed that his poetry might have come from the street as the poetry of the people . He believed that poetry has the capacity of healing power by a simple touch and he considered that poetry can make wonders throughout his life by saving him as a child in his cry for consolation.

Pablo Neruda contemplated poetry in the dark hours of alienation. As a teenage boy, he had to be released from the horrors of isolation that tortured him with minimum mercy. Isolation in his adulthood made him a prisoner as he pathetically described the painful experience in the poem “ *The Pension House on Calle Maruri*” in the below given sorrow-soaked lines:

I open my book. I write
imagining myself
in a mine
shaft, a humid
abandoned tunnel,
I know that there's nobody now,
in the house , in the street, in the bitter city.
I'm a prisoner with the door open,
with the world open .
I am a sad student lost in the twilights,
and I climb to the noodle soup
and descend to my bed and the following day...

A part of the title “*Pension House*” becomes a symbol to express an idea that Neruda suffers from a mental state of frustration. It is to some extent, an image of Neruda's message in the poem which draws the picture of a man who has been abandoned by his fellow human beings after his retirement from service and who is spending his final part of his life with a great expectation of care, love and support from his neighbours. He compares himself to a prisoner which shows that he has been separated from the world of relatives. He is facing an identity crisis and he feels that he is lost among the native crowd. In spite of Neruda's longing for solitude beyond his much troubled state of mind caused and caught by his isolation in particular, he is not in favour of solitude for the purpose of writing poetry; he does not prefer solitude as a suitable vehicle for the creation of poetry. Instead, he prefers loneliness as an apt arrangement for poetry writing as he rightly justifies this argument in his book “*Memoirs*” in powerful words :

Solitude, in this case, was not a formula for building up a writing mood but something as hard as a prison wall; you could smash your head against the wall and nobody came, no matter how you screamed or wept. The young writer cannot write without the shudder of loneliness, even when it is only imaginary, any more than a mature writer will be able to produce anything without a favour of human companionship, of society (91).

When Neruda migrated to Santiago from his hometown Temuco for his academic purpose, with severe sense of loss, he looked back with a longing for the past and this reminiscence of Neruda for nostalgia was very much reflected in one of his poems “*Night Train*” which records his painful departure from his native place in these pain-painted words :

the long rails continued afar,
following on, following on
the Night Train among the vineyards,
..... when
I looked backward
It was raining,
my childhood was disappearing.
The thundering train entered
Santiago de Chile, the capital,
I felt the sorrow of the rain :
Something was separating me from my blood
And as I went out frightened
to the street ,
I know because I was bleeding,
that my roots had been cut off.

After arriving to another unknown area, the aftermath of his migration from one place to another place within his own soil caused him a psychological struggle within Neruda left fissures in mind and heart. It was a difficult and different diasporic experience, for the first time, to Neruda as he underwent this kind of agony in his motherland. The rain in the above cited poem remains a symbol of sorrow, suffering and displacement shadowed over the psyche of Pablo Neruda. He was not able to pass over his childhood and hometown as they were the essential part of his life. Neruda feels uprooted from the native soil and crowd and it brings irreparable repercussions in his mind. Neruda recorded the impact of his alienation and his cruel condition of being uprooted from his native land in his book “*Memoirs*” in powerful words :

My diplomatic suicide gave me the infinite pleasure of being able to return to Chile. I believe a man should live in his own country and I think the deracination of human beings leads to frustration, in one way or another obstructing the light of the soul. I can live only in my own country. I cannot live without having my feet and my hands on it and my ear against it, without feeling the movement of its waters and its shadows, without feeling my roots reach down into its soil for maternal nourishment (165).

It is the cruel destiny of the people all around the world who are migrants and refugees to carry their memory with them wherever they go in search of a sanctuary or of a shelter under the sky in an alien soil. They have no roots of their own. Latin American Novelist Isabel Allende, in an interview, narrated the grief-stricken conditions of the migrated people away from the roots by telling her own story of displacement in much mournful manner :

I have always been displaced. I was born in Peru, raised in Chile, travelled in my adolescence because my stepmother was a diplomat, went to Venezuela as a political refugee after the political coup of 1973 in my country, and eventually ended up as an immigrant in the U.S. My roots are in my memory and in the hearts of the few people I love. In my writing, I am always looking at the past. I have written much about Chile, although I have not lived there for almost half a century. I have an idealised Chile in my mind and my heart.

In the light of the words from the interview of Isabel Allende, it can be understood that how long and how much the minds of the migrated people including Neruda met massive level mental challenges all along the ways to accommodate themselves in an alien place. Neruda tried to overcome his sense of desperation by an intelligent way by writing poetry on desperation and he attempted to make himself so strong by exploiting his weakness of being a secluded personality. He became successful in turning his isolation by making use of the same as his consolation with support of poetry. He escaped from being a victim to the prey of loneliness. He took isolation as one of his major themes of his poetry. In the poem entitled "*Desperation*", Neruda emotionally draws a picture of his alienated disposition mixed with melancholic words :

They have closed my eyes. My God!
and I don't know the sorrow where I am.
.... sorrow has cruelly nailed my soul.
Where do I look? My eyes! My eyes!
Who suffocates my voice in my mouth?
I'm alone, Lord, I'm alone
and I don't feel the beat of my heart .
Who calls for me in the shadows? who feels
My howls of rage and pain?
Impotence squeezes me. They don't come!
But black desperation comes.
Who do I call, Lord, who do I call?
It's useless to call You!
I smash my fingers in vain,
still I know You haven't come to my soul.
....And the wind carries my voices,
and the abyss brings me obscurity!

The above cited poem is one of the better and bitter of poems of Pablo Neruda in which he mourns over his abandoned state of mind and through which he appeals to God for the salvation from the firm crisps of loneliness and in another point of view, this poem expresses Neruda's disappointment and hopelessness to the extreme and he vehemently criticises the negligence of the Almighty who is least to bother to intervene in the miseries of human beings and who remains reluctant to rescue and redeem the restless minds got down in the vague valleys of desperation. The tone of the poem reminds the absurdity and the helpless state of human beings reflected in Thomas Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in which the major characters of the play wait in vain for the intervention of God in their distress. With a heavy heart heaped full of anxiety, despair and a craving for redemption, as Faustus did in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Neruda implores for the mercy of God to get him away from the concentration camp of loneliness and alienation.

Encountering isolation at the very earlier stage of his adulthood, Neruda could not bear the burden of being single with worst worried wretched heart and this brought him tight corners to come across depicted in the poem “Desperation”. The observation of Mark Eisner over the unmerciful moments that seized Neruda into an imprisonment of alienation rightly commented with a couple reasons that caused catastrophe and how poetry came to rescue Neruda in the book *The Poet's Calling* with wonderful words :

Neftali's adolescence was marked by isolation, unrequited love, sadness, and frequent illness, exacerbated by the confines of his harsh father's home and the hard weather and poverty of the frontier. Poetry became a way to express his frustrations and angst, as is clear in the aptly titled poem “Desperation”, which he wrote in his notebook as a teenager. The language may not flow as beautifully as in his mature work, but the young man's yearning is palpable, as is his inherent sense that, as poet-observer, vision is vital(41).

This poem of Neruda entitled “*Walking Around*” gives an account of his inability to survive in the cruel world which is full of and it expresses a nihilistic attitude towards human life. He deals with the challenges of being a man in the universe with philosophical approach in these words :

Comes a time I'm tired of being a man.
Comes a time I check out the tailor's or the movies
shrivelled, impenetrable, like a felt swan
launched into waters of origin and ashes.
A whiff from the barber shops has me wailing.
All I want is a break from rocks and wool,
all I want is to see neither buildings nor gardens,
no shopping centers, no bifocals, no elevators.
Comes a time I'm tired of my feet and my fingernails
and my hair and my shadow,
comes a time I'm tired of being a man.

The poem “*Walking Around*” remains a testimony of Neruda's powerful description over disillusionment of human life and depicted the limitations of human capacity in determining their destiny.

In another poem entitled “*Neighbourhood Without Light*”, Neruda writes his frustrations, sinking helplessness and in which his detachment from his neighbourhood is apparent :

And here I am, sprouted among the ruins,
alone, biting all sadness,
as if weeping were a seed,
and I, the only furrow in the earth.

The lines of the above mentioned poem reveals how Neruda is soaked in sadness and his existence on the earth is futile and he thinks that there is no meaning to human life which is full of sadness, frustration, disappointment and bitterness. Neruda's cry as an appeal in the poem which demands a fraternal support for him in his distress and the same tone and the mood of Pablo Neruda is revealed in the poem “*Dawn's Dim Light*” in a frustrated voice:

I'm alone among ruined matter,
The rain falls over me and I am like the rain,
with its absurdity, alone in the dead world,
rejected as it falls, stubborn yet nebulous.

In many among the poems of Neruda under the theme of isolation, the repeated and frequently appeared symbol is rain to indicate that his poetry is wet with the downpour of desperation and to

display his intense grief caused by isolation and his expectation for the grace and mercy of the divine power from the sky.

Margaret Atwood says that “we stick to time as flies stick to ointment”. In order to escape from his loneliness, Neruda stuck to poetry writing. Not mingling with the mainstream, Neruda lived in a world of imagination and he believed that poetry would bring all the sorrows of isolation to an end. The inspiring of lines “Away! Away! for I will fly to thee, /Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,/ But on the viewless wings of poesy” of John Keats in the poem “*Ode to a Nightingale*” reminds of Neruda’s idea of attempting an adventure of uplifting himself to a paradise with the help of poetry writing. He kept the trust that poetry would become a suitable vehicle to escape from his much disturbed and troubled personality negatively built by his bitter experiences of loneliness.

T.S. Eliot, in his seminal essay “*Tradition and the Individual Talent*” framed a unique theory of poetry which rightly justifies the intention of poetry writing that “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotions, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality (51)”. With a modification in the theory of T.S. Eliot, it can be concluded that the poetry of Pablo Neruda is not only a turning loose of emotions but also an escape from emotion; it is not only the expression of personality but also an escape from personality. As an Arch Angel, Poetry, for Neruda, came down from heaven to become a herald of good news to look after him in his isolation and poetry became “Manna” a life giving food to Neruda. Poetry as a weapon helped him to fight against the internal war of alienation and isolation. Mark Eisner also endorsed and acknowledged the same argument in his book “*The Poet’s Calling*” by his keen observation:

Through poetry, which slows life down for him, he can now get the business of making sense of it all. He can contemplate, inquire. Everything begins to fall into order. Clarity comes only through the act of creating poetry. His poetry is a weapon to fight off what’s subsuming him, his will to create some semblance of order. Neruda continued to find respite in the act of writing poetry. His practice of writing poetry would serve as a balm for the utter desolation of his mind. Neruda sieved his mental currents as he poured his soul into his poetry (138).

Conclusion :

For Pablo Neruda, throughout his life, poetry writing became an accompaniment to walk beside him; it played the role of a companion to share his bitter and better experiences; it was a boon to him in disguise to get rid of him from curses; it became a powerful weapon to fight against the evil clutches of alienation; it was a superhero to rescue him in grey hours of despair; it became a vehicle to carry his worries and queries away from his mind; it appeared as Saviour to redeem him from sorrows and sufferings; it played the role of a caretaker who took pains to look after him in distress; it became a Samaritan to have a genuine compassion to cure his wounded personality. On the whole, poetry writing became a consolation in his isolation with a parental care.

Works Cited :

1. Neruda, Pablo. Complete Works. Edited. Hernan Loyola. Barcelona : Galaxia Gutenberg. 1980.
2., Memoirs. Trans. Hardie St. Martin. Rupa & Co. New Delhi. 1997.
3. Eisner, Mark. The Essential Neruda : Selected Poems. City Lights Publications. San Francisco : USA. 2004.
4., The Poet’s Calling. Harper Collins Publications. New York. 2018.
5. Hardy, Thomas. Far From The Madding Crowd. Fingerprint Publications. New Delhi. 2020.
6. Allende, Isabel. Interview. The Hindu. Magazine. Sup. 13 Feb. 2022.
7. Eliot T.S. Sacred Wood : Essays on Poetry and Criticism. Methuen & Co. Ltd. London. 1950.
8. Keats, John. The Odes. E-ARTNOW Publishers. UK. 2018.
9. Beckett, Thomas. Waiting For Godot. Pearson Education. India. 2016.
10. Marlowe, Christopher. Doctor Faustus. Oxford University Press. UK. 1997.