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Resurrecting Native Pride: D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*

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Abstract

In his writings of the 1920s about the native American people where he gives an acute analysis of the damaging influence of colonization on both the white men as well as the American Indians, D.H. Lawrence is much ahead of his times. Indeed the writer's imagination is strained to the utmost as he makes a genuine effort to grasp the ethos, the ways of living and being of a different race and culture. It is to be admitted that Lawrence has oscillating responses to colonial issues. At times, he seems to clearly share the prejudices of his age as, for example, when Somers contends in *Kangaroo* that the Indians are not prepared to govern themselves. However, Lawrence's rejection of the values of his own culture is so very authentic and forceful that it puts into a clear perspective his stance toward the issue of colonialism. The novel makes a tremendous effort to decipher the meaning of the call made directly on the blood by the massive, angry and desecrated elements of Mexico. While the white man's attempts to improve the social conditions are shown as lacking a proper understanding of the pulse and the psyche of the people, the native's desire for a bygone era, for wonder and mystery, and for living beyond money and externalities is underlined with sympathy. The novel fore shadows many of the ways adopted by later African writers to undermine colonialism. While depicting the damage caused to the psyche of both the natives and the white men, the novel seeks to resurrect a sense of pride dignity among the natives, aiming to rid them of their feeling of inferiority.

Keywords: Dignity, Pride, Colonial, Postcolonial, Marginality.

In his writings of the 1920s about the native American people where he gives an acute analysis of the damaging influence of colonization on both the white races and the American Indians, D.H. Lawrence is much ahead of his times. Indeed the writer's imagination is strained to the utmost as he makes a genuine effort to grasp the ethos, the ways of living and being of a different race and culture. It is to be admitted that Lawrence has oscillating responses to colonial issues and, at times, seems to share clearly the prejudices of his age, as, for example, when Somers contends in Kangaroo

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that the Indians are not prepared to govern themselves. However, Lawrence's rejection of the values of his own culture is so very authentic and forceful that it puts into a clear perspective his stance toward the issue of colonialism. Ursula's rejection of Skrebensky in The Rainbow, one recalls, is inextricably linked with his status as a colonizer in India and Africa. Taking into account Lawrence's fascination for the dark American continent as repository of altogether different life-values and his repudiation of the domineering ways of the white civilization, this paper attempts a post colonial reading of Lawrence's Mexican novel *The Plumed Serpent*. It puts forward the argument that many of the ways adopted by later African writers to undermine colonialism are foreshadowed in this classic novel that was published in 1926.

I am going to attempt a postcolonial reading of D.H. Lawrence's novel *The Plumed Serpent*. This is a novel set in Mexico which became a Spanish colony at the beginning of the 16th century. Therefore I begin by briefly sketching Mexican history.

It was the year 1519 when a few hundred Spanish adventurers led by Hernan Cortes invaded the domains of the Mexican Aztecs. By 1521 Mexico had been conquered. After the Conquest, the Spanish King set up a system, through which colonial masters were to provide for the material and spiritual welfare of the Indians (Clark 563). However the natives were enslaved. No one of native birth, even if purely Spanish, was permitted to hold office. Those who worked the land for the Spanish became serfs, peons. Spanish overlords and the Catholic Church continued to take over Indian land, much of which had been held in communal ownership by tribal custom (Clark 563). Though the Mexican people won their independence from Spain in 1821, they achieved little political or economic emancipation. The Catholic Church retained its wealth and privileges. The ruling class that was ever in a state of opposition, kept the country in a state of constant revolution (Clark 563). Gradually the land taken away from the Church was absorbed by the big *haciendas*. It was this country of "broken walls, broken houses, broken *haciendas*" (*The Plumed Serpent* 63), devastated by its eventful history that Lawrence first visited in March 1923. Set on the Mexican soil, *The Plumed Serpent* makes a tremendous effort to decipher the meaning of the call made directly on the blood by the massive, angry and desecrated elements of Mexico, as it grapples with the implications of the imposition of an alien culture and religion on another race.

The novel *The Plumed Serpent* has certainly been no favourite with Lawrencean critics and scholars. It has been criticized, in particular, for its insistent ideology, the killings, and what is taken to be its advocacy of male supremacy. Even sympathetic critics like F.R. Leavis, Harry T. Moore, Mark Spilka and Mark Kinkead-Weekes have found fault with the novel. The novel has its faults and excesses. However, it is one thing to castigate the novel for events and incidents, that have been viewed as "rebarbative" (Kinkead-Weekes 73) and quite another to condemn the novel wholesale. Terry Eagleton has certainly done no service to Lawrence when along with Aaron's Rod and Kangaroo, he enlists the preoccupations of *The Plumed Serpent*: "a protofascist veneration of power, 'blood hierarchy', racial purity, male bonding, charismatic leadership, the revival of 'primitive' ritual and mythology, and the brutal subjugation

of women" and dismisses it as "execrable" (278, 272). The novel's attempt to found a religion by resurrecting the gods of ancient Mexico should not be brushed aside as repelling or as exotic primitivism. While depicting the damage caused to the psyche of both the natives and the white men, the novel seeks to resurrect a sense of pride and dignity among the natives, aiming to rid them of their feeling of inferiority. The Catholic Church that is destroyed in the course of events, is seen not just as a drab institution, failing to vivify the Mexican soul, but as an agent of domination and colonialism. The violence that erupts may be seen as necessary for breaking the shackles of psychological and political colonialism.

For Homi Bhabha, the encounter of colonizer and colonized always affects both. As he says in "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Cult", while colonialism brings a radically unsettling "affective experience of social marginality", the colonial experience also affects the colonizer (56). Shifting his focus to the colonial hybrid, Bhabha argues that the cultural interaction of colonizer and colonized leads to a fusion of cultural forms. Hybridity thus gets positive connotation as it "intervenes in the exercise of authority" (Location of Culture 163). Making an acute diagnosis of the Mexican situation, Lawrence analyzes closely the effects of cultural encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. He locates the damage caused to the psyche of both in factors such as the colonizers' wilful insistence on having his own way and the colonized people's mimicry, their aping and imitating their rulers' superior mode of life while actually desiring something else. Affected by centuries of colonial presence "the eternal peon of Mexico," (*The Plumed Serpent* 64) is gripped with a desire to join the course of modernization. The process of Americanization is on: "one hope, one faith, one destiny, to ride in a camion, to own a motor car," (*The Plumed Serpent* 98). However, this outward imitation of modernization serves only to bring the inward sense of wrong and being cheated to the fore. The result is rage and rowdiness – a desire to pull everything to the ground. In the remarkable opening Chapter "Bull-Fight" Kate Leslie, the protagonist of the novel, is shocked to see the brazen display of "human indecency" as the masses gathered in the bull-ring degenerate into a vulgar, rowdy mob (*The Plumed Serpent* 10). The City-bred crowd keenly enjoys the spectacle of bulls being gored to death, deriving a perverse pleasure in "beastliness, a smell of blood, a nauseous whiff of bursten bowels" (*The Plumed Serpent* 9). Kate finds it strange that these people seem to want the ugly things, to enjoy making everything fouler" (*The Plumed Serpent* 29). The black eyes of the natives appear to have no "centre", no "real I" in them, but a "raging black hole, like the middle of a maelstrom" (*The Plumed Serpent* 32). Even the elements of this country seem hostile. While the sun blazes angrily over Mexico, the very earth seems to exude a sense of grisly fear, horror. The "ponderous" mountains, the volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl suppress all soaring of spirit and seem to "emit a deep purring sound… audible on the blood, a sound of dread" (*The Plumed Serpent* 40).Like most other white people, Kate feels suffocated, crushed by a terrible oppression of the spirit all the time. In the eyes of so many white men, she has detected "the look of nullity, and life moving in the reversed direction" (*The Plumed Serpent* 66). The spirit of the place is definitely down-dragging towards the white people. The novel diagnoses shrewdly that the white invaders were mistaken

when they wilfully imposed their religion on a different people – a religion that laid the entire emphasis on the spirit and advocated humility and gentleness. They did not consider whether it suited this land of fierce sun and forceful storms. The novel shows clearly that the very blood of the natives revolts against the white man's way of life. An alien religion has failed to touch them inwardly. The Sunday Church that with its cheap glitter, offers no more than a little "orgy of incense" leaving the soul all the more slack, has not just been indifferent to the needs of the Mexicans. It has acted as an agent of coercion and domination, forcing Quetzalcoatl, the revered deity of Mexico, to leave. However, in the process of asserting his own superiority, in attempting to save the others' soul, the white man himself lost his own. Now, thwarted, instead of moving forward, his life is going all backward. The shrewd analysis of colonization shows both the white people and the natives being affected and suffering diminution and disintegration as a consequence of this cultural encounter.

The incidents and events such as the destruction of the Church, the burning of the images and the crashing violence that results, have drawn considerable flak. While it is to be admitted that many of these events are distasteful, the use of violent force becomes necessary for breaking free from the shackles of colonialism. Here the novel looks forward to some of the ideas of Frantz Fanon. Though, Lawrence's attempt to found a religion and invent the liturgy and rituals for it may be part of his whimsical excesses, and as Frank Kermode observes, the Quetzalcoatl symbol may become "tiresome, overdeveloped" (109), it is the Quetzalcoatl religion that holds hope for the natives, as well as the colonizers.

It is neither an alien religion, nor the outward glitter and externalities and Socialism that hold a key to the Mexican soul. The President of the country, Montes, who wants to make his country progress, to save it from poverty and ignorance with the help of European ideas, is unconcerned about the craving of the Mexican soul. However, the Mexicans who have retained a "strange, submerged desire" for "things beyond the world" are by and large indifferent to money, materialism and comfort (*The Plumed Serpent* 233). They want the wonder of myth and mystery in their lives, long to be connected and sincerely want to believe.

Later as the religion of Quetzalcoatl is declared to be the national religion of the Republic, the longing of the Mexican soul is fulfilled. As Jascha Kessler says, Ramon and Cipriano are men who believe that "Mexico can meet the future only by means of some kind of projection of its psyche" (243). The novel makes a tremendous to effort establish native dignity and identity by resurrecting ancient gods of Mexico. The ancient religion is a religion of living in harmony with the elements. The massive elements of Mexico demand to be held in respect. The angry elemental forces are pacified as there is a revival of morning and evening rituals and people pause for brief prayers at dawn and sunset and are put in connection. The slow round Indian dance "the dance of downward sinking absorption" re-roots the people deep into the earth. In Ramon's *hacienda*, there are artisans, sculptors and blacksmiths who derive pleasure and satisfaction from their work. These men seek neither land nor gold but life first of all. The morning star that shines in their eyes, the star that in Mexico was Quetzalcoatl,

resurrects native pride, dignity and beauty. At the same time, through Kate-Cipriano relationship, the marriage between a white "gringuita" woman and a red Indian, as L.D. Clark observes, the novel envisions a new conception of human life rising out of "a new fusion of white invader and the dark native" (D.H. Lawrence and the American Indian 362). While emphasizing the need of balance between mind and blood, the novel looks forward to a new vivified life rising out of the union between the white races and the Mexican natives.

In its vision of the natives of Mexico seeking inspiration from their past and shedding their present sense of inferiority, *The Plumed Serpent* shows how successful Lawrence has been in decolonizing his imagination. The novel seeks to establish native pride and dignity. At the same time it also hints at a better future in the fusion of the races.

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